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DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

JUNE
35 CENTS

A PETER CHAMBERS NOVELETTE BY

Henry Kane

EVERY STORY NEW!

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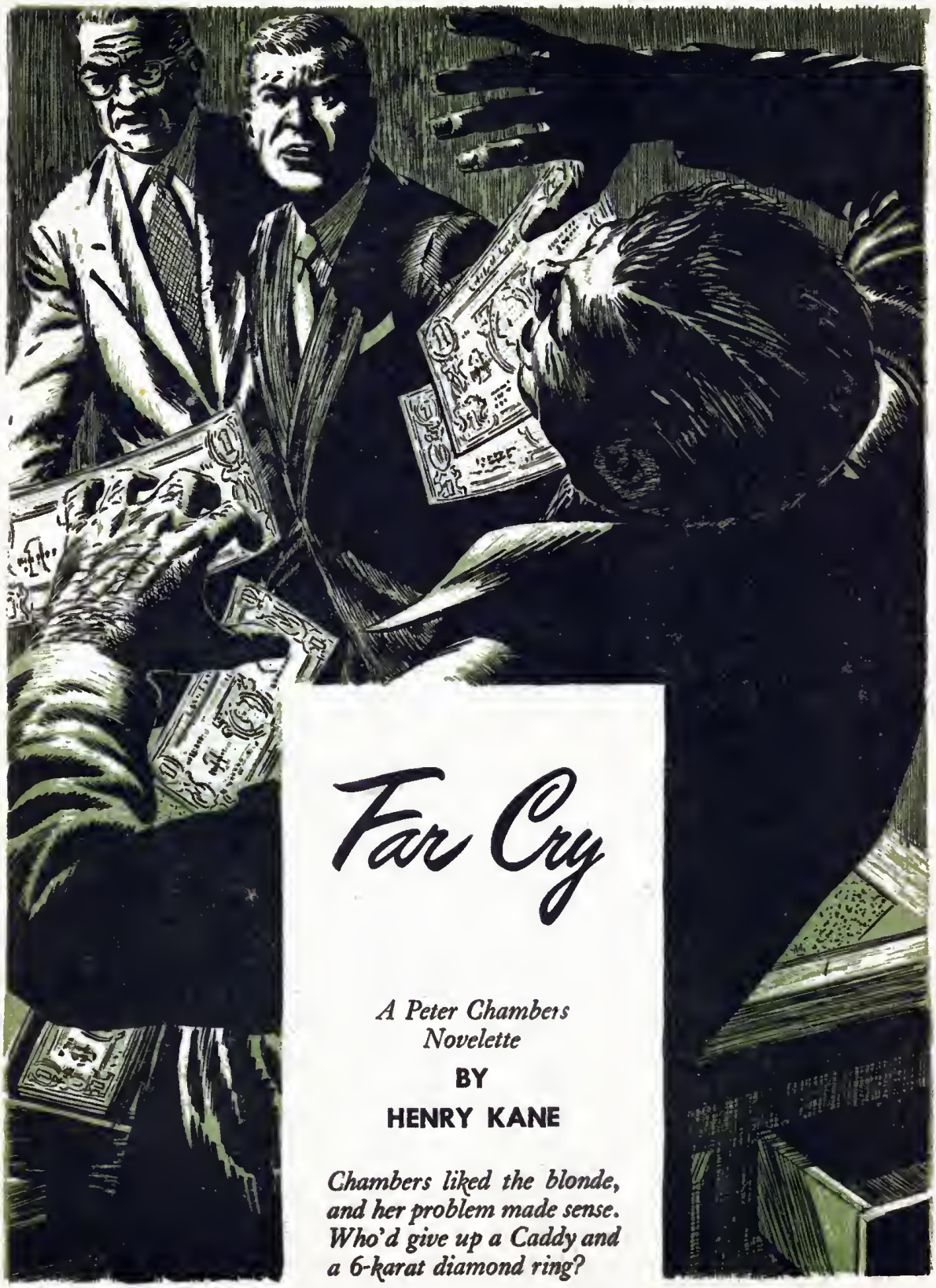

Far Cry

A Peter Chambers Novelette

BY

HENRY KANE

Chambers liked the blonde, and her problem made sense. Who'd give up a Caddy and a 6-karat diamond ring?

It's a far cry from a beach chair to an operating table, but I made it — in one day. It's a far cry from sunshine, the peaceful blue of a swimming pool, a lovely girl poised on a diving board — to two bullets in my body, the white glare of surgery, and the antiseptic walls of a hospital room. But I made it. Same day. It's a far cry from lush pulchritude to plush hoodlumism . . . or is it?

It isn't.

The party the night before had been the best kind of party that happens in New York. It had been the after-opening-night affair of a brand new musical given by the producer (and assorted angels) in a high-ceilinged sixteen room duplex on Central Park West. The musical was a smash, and it was a nice, happy party.

Happy, that is, for everybody but me.

Because me: it was a girl again.

She was brown, deeply tanned. She was blonde, with glistening lips. She was tall, shapely tall. Her eyes were blue and shining, her mouth red and shining, her hair gold and shining. Her gown was black nakedness, glistening satin, simple without whirls, and firm to her figure. It started at the rise of her breasts and descended, tightly, to the calf. She wore black high-heeled pumps and black nylons. If you can get away with black nylons, you're something. She was something. When she walked, she swayed, her head up and her shoulders back as though she were pushing against a high wind. If you watched her going away, you saw the thrust-back shimmering shoulders, a pinched-in waist, and then a number of curves. I watched her, coming and going. She wore no spot of jewelry except one, a brilliant engagement ring, at least three carats.

The engagement ring, of course, spoiled the party for me.

I caught my first glimpse of her late, it must have been two o'clock in the morning. Maybe she'd arrived late or maybe she'd been swallowed up by the four hundred people present, the sixteen rooms, the upstairs and the downstairs. There was a crap game going, a raucous man-and-lady crap game, and I had the dice, it was my turn to shoot. I was getting down to one knee and my glance flicked up — when I saw her, at the far end of the room. My lust for gambling instantly died. I passed the dice, straightened up, and went to her — but now she was going away. I lost her at the stairs. I was captured by twin fat ladies in horn-rimmed glasses and identical green dresses who wanted to talk about the rumbles of revolution in Africa. I got out of that by the judicious injection of a few inoffensive items of profanity, and I left them, slightly aghast and clucking.

Downstairs, after a rambling search, I found her, surrounded by men in tuxedoes, none of whom I knew.

But then the producer came by, not sober, but in a reasonable state of comprehension. I talked fast, nudged a little, winked a lot and held on to his elbow until a light came into his fast-going-opaque eyes, and he said, "Okay, okay, I get it."

He broke through the phalanx of black ties, and brought forth the lady. He maneuvered us to relatively isolated propinquity, glared at her, glared at me, and then, brilliantly, he said, "You two ought to meet, you two certainly ought to meet. Lola Southern, Peter Chambers."

"How do you do?" I said.

"Why?" she said.

I said: "Pardon?"

She said: "Why?"

"I don't understand."

"Why," she said, "must we two meet?"

"Oh. I don't know, really don't know, but he's been saying that to me all night, pointing you out to me, and saying it, over and over."

"Has he?"

"He has."

"All night?"

"All the livelong night."

"I only got here ten minutes ago."

What do you answer to that? You don't answer.

But she was kind. Her blue eyes moved over me, slowly, and then she smiled, and brother, that tore it. When she smiled it was two rows of perfectly white teeth ringed by the glistening red of her lips, but that wasn't it. The lips came out from the teeth in a shining pout, and the eyes narrowed, and there was the faintest flutter of the nostrils of her small nose. Even that wasn't it. It was the expression that the smile put on her face. It was as though she had just heard the most wildly salacious story, and had loved every syllable of it, and had smiled despite herself, smiled holding back, smiled trying to restrain a manifestation of reaction. It put prickles on your scalp.

She said, "Are you in the show?"

"No. I'm not in the show."

"You certainly look theatrical enough. You're handsome. I never make bones about that. I tell them right to their faces. Better that way. Man shaves and fixes and primps and things, and then he runs up against a doll and wonders how he's coming over. Doll says nothing, enigmatic. Poor guy keeps wondering. Thinks he's lost his sex appeal. Well . . . you haven't. I love a good-looker. What'd you say your name was?"

"Chambers. Peter Chambers."

"Not with the show, huh?"

"No. Nor are you."

Now she frowned. Beautifully. "How would you know that?"

"Two plus two. If you *were* in the show — you'd know I wasn't."

"Pretty good."

"That's my business."

"What?"

"Two plus two."

"I don't get it."

"I'm a cop."

"Cop? No. You're not a policeman. You couldn't be . . ."

"Sort of. Private. I'm a private detective."

"Not really."

"Yep."

"You know, it's hard for me to take that, I mean, well, private detectives, I just didn't think they existed, I thought they were something, well, that the movies created for their own sinister purposes. What did you say your name was?"

"Peter Chambers."

"You know," she said, the smile going away, a reflective light coming into her eyes, "I've heard of you."

"Thanks."

"Vaguely, but I'm sure I have. How about a vodka martini, Mr. Peter Chambers?"

"Will you stay put if I get a couple?" I asked.

"I'll try."

I went away, and I came back perilously balancing two brimful martinis. Miss Lola Southern was surrounded by five speculative males, three in tails and two in black ties, and somebody had moved fast — Miss Southern had a vodka martini in each fist. Just between you and me, Miss Southern was tighter than a jammed-down hat in a sleet storm. Had been, from the first moment we'd spoken. She laughed loud and tinklingly, and raised the left martini high. That's when I saw the engagement ring.

I mumbled a sneaky toast, clinked glasses, and drank both martinis, gulpingly. I couldn't crash the glasses into a fireplace, because there was no fireplace, so I slid them on the first tray that went by. Then I went back to the crap game and saw no more of Lola Southern that night. Worse, I dropped two hundred and sixty-nine dollars betting, waiting for somebody to make a roll.

Nobody did.

2.

Next morning I awoke to the urgings of small explosions inside of me. I crawled out of bed and transported a large head to the cold water faucet, precariously placed it beneath, and let it shrink to size. Then I showered, shaved, drank tomato juice from the can, and went to the office. A rainy day would have suited my mood, but when your luck runs bad, it runs, as you know, all bad. The day was fine, warm, clear and bright. Sun shone thick and yellow.

My reception at the office was better. It was twelve-thirty, but there were no messages, no mail, no calls, no checks, no clients, and my secretary, deathly pale, complained of a virus in the stomach. I told her to go home. She plugged in the switchboard for rings in my office, and went. For me, naturally, there was but one thing to do: grab a cab up to the Polo Grounds, strip down and bake out in left field. I proceeded to do exactly that. I switched off the lights, shut off the switchboard, and left it up to Answering Service to take care of my business. I opened the door and almost ran head-on into Lola Southern.

"Coming or going?" she said.

"That's up to you."

"I don't know just how to take that."

"That's up to you too."

"I was going to invite you out."

"Fine. I was going out."

"Where?"

"You name it."

"No coaxing required?"

"Not when it's you."

We went to the elevator, waited, went down, and I let her out before me. She wore a powder-blue suit and toeless blue high-heeled shoes with intricate straps. Her ankles were stylishly slender, curving up to full round-muscled calves. Her golden hair was caught in a ring in back, pony-tail, and it swung down to her shoulders. Her walk was the walk of last night, the provocative swaying-ever-so-slightly, but enough to cause the gentlemen in the lobby to purse their lips in unemitted whistles.

Outside, parked smack against a *No Parking* sign, was a Caddy convertible, this year's model, powder-blue and sleek. "That's it," she said.

"This?"

"Yep."

"Not bad."

She got in, slid into the driver's seat, and I got in after her. She said, "I took a chance on a ticket. I was anxious to see you."

"You could have called."

"I can't abduct you over the telephone."

We pulled away from the curb and headed north, turned right at Fifty-Ninth, and got on to the bridge. She said, "Aren't you curious as to where we're going?"

"I'm perfectly satisfied."

"You're a strange one, aren't you?"

"No."

Silence, then, all the way to the smooth Triboro. Then she said, "I want to apologize for last night."

"Apologize?"

"I was looped. But looped."

"I know that. But you were awfully cute."

"Thanks."

I said, "May I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"What do you do?"

"Do?"

"For a living."

"I'm a diver."

"Come again?"

"A diver."

I digested that for a moment. I said, "You mean you're one of those people that puts a helmet on her head and looks at fish, and things?"

"No. I put a bathing suit on my body, and part water. Gracefully."

I digested that for a while. Then I said, "This you do for a living?"

"I was a crackerjack amateur once. Now I'm a professional. It pays the rent."

"Does it pay for Cadillac convertibles too?"

"It doesn't. But that's another story. One which I'm going to tell you."

"Now?"

"Not now. Later."

I digested that too. I love to listen to stories. Stories mean business and business was something I could use, badly. The lady hadn't barged in on the private detective strictly for the purpose of taking him for rides over bridges. I'd been waiting for the first leak in the dike, and this seemed to be it. So I changed the subject. I got off crass commercialism. I said, "Diving. Sister, I'd love to watch you sometime."

"You're going to. Quite soon. That's where we're heading."

"We're going diving?"

"Not we. I. There's a new water show going to open next month. I'm to be one of the stars. Little guy that runs it owns a terrific estate out at Lido. Swimming pool, and all. He's in Europe now, but he told me I could use the place any time I wanted. For practice, that is."

"Ever use it before?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't, that is, not since he's gone. I have my own spots for practice. But I thought it would be a good idea today. It's warm and lovely out, and I wanted to be alone with you, somewhere where we could talk. Any objections?"

"Not a one."

3·

The place in Lido was like a Moorish castle. We drove up a winding pebbled roadway to a massive iron gateway. I got out and pushed a bell that sounded like a fire gong. A man came out of a small house perhaps a hundred yards in, and trotted down to us. Lola waved to him. I got back into the car while he opened the gates. We rolled through, Lola and the man exchanged further waves, and then we lost him as we went up another winding roadway until we arrived at the house proper. House? It was a mansion, if by mansion you can imagine a red stone edifice of beautiful architecture, a sprawling, six-storied, spic-and-span hunk of work, with at least a hundred rooms. The man at the gate must have phoned in. A house-man came running down the stairs. Lola pulled up the brake, and we both got out. The house-man said, "Welcome. It's a pleasure to see you, Miss Southern."

"Hello, Fred. You'll take care of the car?"

"Of course. Would you and the gentleman like lunch?"

"No, thank you. I'm going to put in a few licks of practice. The pool's in order, I take it."

"Oh, yes."

"And then the gentleman and I are going to want to talk, in private. There's nobody at the bath-house, is there?"

"Nobody. There's nobody here at all, except the servants, and there's nobody expected. Would you like me to drive you out, Miss?"

"No, thank you, we'll walk."

It was a hike of three quarters of a mile, and I was no high diver in the pink of condition. I practically fell into the bath-house. Which was

another joke. When you say bath-house you think bath-house. This wasn't what you'd think. This was a red-brick ranch-house, with a kitchen that could have provided for a small army, and about twenty beautifully furnished bedrooms, each equipped with its own plumbing. In the kitchen, I opened one of the refrigerators, stocked from top to bottom, grabbed a bottle of beer, opened it, and drank it neat.

I said, "You know the guy that owns this joint?"

"He's married," she said sadly.

"Let's get to the pool," I said.

"I'm ready. And eager."

"What do I do for trunks? Or don't I?"

"Every room has men's trunks and ladies' suits. Find a pair that fit you. They're all sterilized. See you at the pool."

I wandered around looking the place over, mumbling and remumbling about how it's nice to have dough. Then I found a pair of yellow trunks that fit. I got out of my clothes, pulled into the trunks, and went out to the pool.

It was wide and long and transparently blue and unrippled and peaceful. There were beach chairs on all four sides, and iron chairs and tables, and coolers for the colas, with cabinets fixed in the sides. I opened one cabinet. It had everything from gin to champagne.

Lola was nowhere in sight. I couldn't wait. I was steaming from every pore. I went into the pool and rippled up the water plenty. It was cold and refreshing. I swam around a bit and climbed out. I fixed a drink out of one of the cabinets, spread out in a beach chair, and let the sun dry me out. I felt good, real good.

I felt better a moment later. Lola appeared on the far side in a white bathing suit, a white cap, and a towel about her shoulders. Lola in clothes was something. Lola in a bathing suit was something more. I wondered about Lola without a bathing suit.

She smiled at me, and even from that distance, I felt it, the begging smile, the smile of the secret thoughts, the lush, warm, wet, shining smile. Then she flung off the towel, and climbed up to the top board, posed poised, and dove. It was beautiful. It took your breath away. It was clean, sharp, almost geometrically beautiful. For the next half hour, I was treated to quite an exhibition. It was so beautiful, I almost forgot her body. Almost.

Then she called, "That's all. Finished. Come on in for a quick dip, and we'll quit."

I jumped in and we swam together. Then she came close, treading water, and the smile was small, and intense. I put my arms around her and kissed her there in the water. I kissed her for the first time. She clung, all the way. Then she moved back and looked at me, our feet treading water together.

"I like you," she said. "I like you

very much. Maybe I'm in love with you. It happens."

"That's why you ran off last night."

"Maybe. Maybe that's why I did. But I came back, didn't I?"

"That the only reason you came back? Because 'Maybe I'm in love with you.' "

She laughed, the tinkling laugh, and her eyes were gentle. "That," she said, "and another reason." She splashed away. "Let's get out of here."

Top-side, she took off the cap and shook out her hair. She wiped her face with the towel, and wiped mine. "Let's sit in the sun for a while," she said, "and talk."

"Sure."

Her body glistened. Her thighs were full, and sun-brown, and long, and glistening. She was a glistening girl, that was the sum of her, her lips, her hair, the flesh of her. I wondered whether that brown was her color, if she was brown all over.

"Let's sit," she said. "I think you can help me."

"Now we come to it," I said.

We lay out side by side in the lounging chairs. The sun warmed down. I was drowsy, but I was listening.

"It's tough on a girl," she said. "This racket."

"But you're good. You're wonderful."

"It's peanuts, if you have to depend on it for your living."

"Do you?"

"I didn't. But I do now."

"I don't get that."

She stretched, moving her arms up over her head. I was less drowsy at once. "I was married once, as a kid. My husband was much older than I, almost thirty years older. He left me a good deal of money. So it seemed, at least."

"You mean he died?"

"Yes."

"Natural causes?"

"Yes."

"Then the money petered, that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"But this diving deal . . . ?"

"It's nothing."

"But you can move up from that. You've got talent, and you're beautiful, really beautiful."

"Thanks. Move? In what direction?"

"Motion pictures. TV. You know. Others have made that jump. Swimmers . . ."

"No good, my friend. You've got to learn to be an actress."

"Others have."

"They started when they were kids. Let's face it, pal. I'm twenty-six, now. You don't start a motion picture career, from scratch, at twenty-six."

"Maybe so," I said.

"Oh, I've had offers, from all kinds of promoters. Nothing could happen, and I know that. Nothing except trouble from a lot of men. That's a hard little head on these shoulders." She touched her hair.

"And what's on the finger?"

"Pardon?"

"The ring."

"That's part of the story."

"Three carats, isn't it? At least that."

"It's six."

"Shows you. I'm no judge. So let's get to the story, huh?"

She wriggled to get comfortable. More and more I was getting less and less drowsy. She said, "I've been around. Let's get that out of the way. I've distributed my favors, if that's what it's called. But judiciously. With people I've liked. And I've accepted favors. From people I like. But I'm no bum. Let's get that out of the way too."

"Fine. You're all right."

She held out the hand with the sparkling ring. "Four months ago, I became engaged. You know Ben Palance?"

Old Ben Palance was a friend of mine, a rugged leather-faced man with a full head of strong white hair. He was a man of seventy, a retired sea captain.

"Improving on the first husband?" I said. "But this one's got no loot."

I was sorry I had said it before I had gotten it out. Ice jumped into her eyes.

I said, "I'm the bum around here. I'm sorry. This just isn't my day."

"Remember I had said I'd heard of you," she went on. "It came to me later last night. I had heard of you through Ben. He thinks the world of you."

"And I of him. But what's the connection?"

"I'm engaged to Ben's son, Frank Palance. Do you know him?"

"No. I've heard about him, but I never met him." I squirmed around in the chair. "Look, don't get sore, and take this as it's meant. You're a girl who's used to good things, who sees no future in her profession, who figures to marry well . . . so that the good things can keep coming. Am I all wrong?"

"No."

"So what's with Frank Palance?"

"I don't understand."

"From what I've heard, he's a nice guy, and all that, but he's a sailor, or something, first mate on a boat, something like that."

"That's wrong."

"His circumstances must have improved."

She lifted her left hand. "This ring was bought by Frank. The convertible was a gift from Frank. He has a fully staffed house up in Scarsdale, and a penthouse apartment in town. He's not a first mate on a boat, he's the master of his own freighter."

"And how his circumstances must have improved."

"I met him about four months ago. Whirlwind romance, one of those things. But it was a mistake. More and more did I realize it. Frank is bad. He's mean and vicious. I'm frightened to death of him. I can't possibly tell you how bad these four months have been. Luckily, he's been at sea part of that time."

"Where do I come in?"

"I want you to help me."

"How?"

"I want you to protect me from Frank. And" — she hesitated a moment — "I want to keep the things he gave me. I've earned them."

"What's the status right now?"

"Status?"

"The romance."

"I broke the engagement the day he left on his last trip."

"When was that?"

"Three weeks ago."

"When's he due back?"

"Tonight."

I squirmed some more in the chair. I was getting to an uncomfortable subject. I said, "What about the fee?"

"Fee?"

"A man's got to eat."

"There's nothing I can offer you. I'm practically broke."

"Nothing?"

Our eyes met for a quick moment, and then, suddenly embarrassed, we both looked toward the sun, blinkingly.

I closed my eyes. I said, "Was there a bust-up, an argument, something?"

"There was."

"An immediate cause for same?"

"Yep. A voluptuous brunette named Rose Jonas. Sings at the Raven Club. In a way, to me, she was a Godsend. It gave me an excuse."

"How long has he known her?"

"Couple of months."

"How'd he meet her?"

"I don't know."

"When'd the bust-up take place, and where?"

"I told you. The day he left on his trip. At his town apartment. We went at it hot and heavy. He hit me, once. He told me to return the ring, and the car, and he told me he was changing his policy, at once, in her favor."

I opened my eyes. I sat up and faced her. Policy. That had the smell of money. Money. Bloodhounds don't have a better smell when it comes to Uncle Sam's crinkling green. "Policy?" I said.

"A kind of gesture, I suppose. Like the six carat ring, and the convertible."

"Gesture, shmesture . . . what about the policy?"

"It was on his life, with me as beneficiary. Double indemnity for accidental death."

"You sound like an insurance salesman. Never mind the quirks. How much?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"Not bad."

"But he said he was changing it. And if he said it, he did it. So get that lustful look out of your eyes."

"That lustful look," I said, "has nothing to do with no policies."

"Hasn't it?" She stood up. "Do you take my case?"

"I've got to think about it."

"Well, think back at the bathhouse. I'm broiling here."

We got up, and started back. She

said, "I'm starving. Don't get dressed. We'll shower, and lounge, and I'll fix you something special to eat."

"Fine by me."

I lost her among the many bedrooms of the bath-house. I took a long warm shower. Then I shaved again and doused my face with some sweet-smelling stuff I found in the medicine chest. I combed my hair. The closet had a snowy white terry-cloth robe. I put that on and it snuggled the warmth of the sun my body had acquired. I felt good. The drowsiness returned. But I had work, protection work, before I lay out on the wide soft bed.

I found pen, ink and paper in a table drawer. I wrote: "I hereby retain Peter Chambers to protect my interests in my relationship with one Frank Palance. His fee is to be twenty percent of whatever may accrue to me from the life insurance policy in the name of the said Frank Palance." I dated it, and drew a line for her signature. I left it on top of the table. Then I sprawled out on the bed, sighed, and was ready for a nap, when the knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," I called.

She wore a snowy white terry-cloth robe. It was different from mine, and she filled it differently. It puffed out on top, was tightly belted in the middle, and puffed out again below that. A pulse near my heart began doing an imitation of a trip-hammer. Her hair was combed out, blonde, loose and flowing, there was make-up on her face, and her red lips pouted, shining. Romantic-like, I said, "Sign the thing on the table."

She looked at it, signed, laid the pen away, said, "For a smart guy, you're cheating yourself. That policy is no longer in my favor. I know Frank. If it is, more power to you. I'd be happy to pay that twenty percent. You'd be much better off if Rose Jonas signed this contract."

"The hell with Rose Jonas."

"Thank you. Are you going to work for me?"

"Yes."

"Then you're entitled to a real fee. Aren't you?"

"Am I?"

"Down payment," she said and came near me. "Down payment," she said, and the smile was off her face, and there was the faintest trembling of her nostrils, and she bent over me, and she smelled sweet, salt-sweet, and she put those full red wet lips on mine.

I didn't move. I didn't put my arms around her. Our only contact was mouth on mouth, wide-spread, clinging. Then her cheek moved along mine, and her voice was a quick-breathing whisper in my ear, and she said, "I love you, Mr. Chambers. I'm crazy, and I know it, but I love you, I love you . . ."

Then she stood up, full-length, straight and breathless by the side of the bed; no smile now, only the shine of tears in her eyes, and the shine on her mouth, the ever-present soft wet shine, a lovely shine.

"I thought of something a while ago," I said.

"What?"

"You're so brown."

"I'm not. I'm a blonde. I'm milky white. The brown is the sun."

"I love the brown too."

"It's ridiculous. It's like a two-tone person. White and brown, white and brown."

I didn't say it, I said nothing, I I didn't say, "I want to see," I didn't say a word, and that small sweet secret special smile crept back on her face, the red pouting smile, the white teeth half exposed; her eyes didn't leave mine, and her fingers dug into the tight-clasped belt, and she flung away the terry-cloth robe.

4.

We got back to the city at four-thirty. She lived at 277 Park Avenue. I kissed her and I said, "Stay put, I'm going to work." I took a cab up to Eighty-sixth and Broadway, The Monterey, where old man Palance lived. I used the house phone to call up. His invitation was quick and hearty. He was waiting at the open door, upstairs. He wore a T-shirt, slacks and sandals. He was big, but there was nothing flabby about him.

"Glad to see you, Pete. It's nice of you to come calling."

"Glad to see you, Ben."

"Come in, come in." He closed the door behind me. "Let me fix you something." He waved a hand at a quarter full bottle on a bureau. "Me, I'm drinking bourbon. But I got anything a guest wants, and if I haven't, I call down for it. What'll it be?"

"Nothing, thanks, Ben."

He wrinkled his eyes at me, the leather of his cheeks making pouches around them. "What's the matter? Sick?"

"No."

"Wagon?"

"No."

"So it figures it ain't a social call. What's the beef, Petie?"

"It's about Frank."

An edge came into his voice. "He in trouble?"

"Why?"

"Because he's been begging for it." He gulped bourbon; pulled up a chair for me, and one for him, said, "Sit down." He filled an old pipe and lit up. "My lady gave me seven kids, peace be with her. Six are the best. One's rotten." He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe that's a good average. What's the beef, Pete?"

I roughed an outline for him, sketchily. When I was through, he shook his head, talked with the pipe between his teeth. "She's a good kid, that Lola. Too good for him. Look, Pete. Come with me tonight. I'm meeting him when he gets off ship. Tonight, at his office. He's due in at eight o'clock. He's thirty-five years old, but I'm still his old man. I got a key to his office, and I'm waiting for him tonight. Tonight we make it or break it. It's been constantly on my mind for the past three weeks."

"What good'll I do? I don't belong."

"You're my friend. He knows you're my friend. He knows all about you. You've never met him, have you?"

"No."

"Come down with me tonight, Pete. It figures for a shindig. Let's get it all over with in one bunch. You got a client to represent. No?"

"Yes."

He smiled, grimly, around the pipe. "I hate it. Maybe that's why I need company. Maybe I need somebody to lean on, somebody young, and tough. Nice way for a father to talk."

"I'm sorry, Ben."

"If he isn't good, I don't care whose son he is. But it's time he knows that I know. You coming?"

"If you want me to, Ben."

"I want you. Where'll I pick you up?"

"I'll pick you up. Here. About seven-thirty."

"Good boy."

Next stop was the Raven Club on Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. This was a cellar trap with all the frills. The entertainment went from torch singers to cooch dancers to female impersonators who didn't have to work too hard for the impersonation. It was a clip joint but it did a steady business with the uptown trade. It was an old time joint, switching its acts regularly. Some of our top-notchers played the Raven on their way up, and hit it once or twice coming down. It was dimly lit, with black walls, small black tables, small black chairs, and indirect red lighting, shooting upward. It was a late spot, going into full action at about ten and winding up with last call for alcohol at four in the morning. This time of early evening the room proper was closed, but the bar was open, catch-as-can, for any thirsty customers that might fall in.

The manager's name was Tom Connors.

At the bar of the Raven, I ordered a scotch and water, and I said, "Tom around?"

"Who's asking?"

"Pete Chambers."

"Just a minute."

The bar was a sort of tap room, separated from the main room, with booths against the walls, and one tired waiter. The bartender signalled to the waiter, who went away and came back with Tom. Tom rubbed a big paw across my back. "Hi, pal. Long time no."

"Have a drink, Tom."

"Don't mind if I do. Gin and tonic, in an old-fashioned glass. And no check on any of it. This guy's a pal of the house." He got his drink, saluted me with it, said, "It's a fact, pal. Really long time no."

"Can we sit in a booth, Tom?"

"Why not? Bring your drink." We moved away from the bar and slid into a booth opposite one another. He said, "What's personal, pal?"

"You know a guy named Frank Palance?"

"Yep."

"What kind of guy?"

"Don't know what kind of guy. Customer, period. Pays on the nose and no squawk."

"Who's Rose Jonas?"

"Doll sings here."

"Now what's the connection between them?"

He drank gin from the wide glass, his teeth clicking against it, and he grinned over the rim. "I like it when you talk to me like that, pal. Real legal-type jabs."

"What's the connection?"

He pushed away the empty glass and folded his hands on the table. "Boy loves girl. That's the connection."

"Does girl love boy?"

"She don't."

"How's it shape?"

"She's playing him."

"She got somebody? A real boyfriend?"

His eyebrows went up as he nodded. "Big."

"Who?"

"Joe April."

I shoved that through a sieve in my mind. Nothing came out. I said, "Joe April? Can't be as big as you say. I've never heard of him."

"West Coast hood. Frisco. Moved into town with a little mob. Plays it big and throws the loot around like toilet paper. He'll either make it in this town, or he'll get cooled fast. Got a lot of guts, but I'm not too sure about the brains. I've seen them all, pal. The smartest are the quiet ones. This guy's got too much flash."

"And Rose Jonas?"

"He brought her in from the Coast."

"Then what's with Frank Palance?"

"This April guy's been knocking off every jane in town. Palance is a good-looking boy. I figure she's using him for a stick against April. I also figure it don't work. I figure April's got a bellyful of Rose. And I got a hunch Rose knows it. She's even been short of dough lately."

"Let's say April stopped laying it on the line. This Frank Palance, from what I hear, is no piker. Rose shouldn't be starving."

"You don't know Rose, pal. Loves a buck, but she can spend it faster'n any dame you ever saw. She can flip for champagne for the house, two hundred customers, just because she likes the applause."

"She any good?"

"Fair."

"Good-looking?"

"Beauty."

"You think she likes Frank?"

"I think she hates him."

"But why?"

"When a dame deals from a cold deck, and it goes wrong, she tears up the cards. You know dames. The way she looks at him sometimes, when he don't know she's looking." He shook his head. "Brother, it ain't good."

"How'd he meet her?"

"April introduced them."

"How's he know April?"

"Search me."

5.

I picked up old Ben at seven-thirty. We had a couple of drinks, talked a while, and took a cab down to South Street. We got there at five minutes to eight. South Street, in the springtime, at five minutes to eight, is quiet, smoky, desolate, the old buildings dark and jagged. We got out of the cab and I paid. The street was empty except for a black car, parked and silent, a man at the wheel. Nothing else. I followed the old man into a narrow hallway that smelled of spice. We clumped up a flight of wooden stairs. A door at the head of the stairs gave back the legend by the yellow hall-light: *Frank Palance, International Freight Forwarder.* The old man mumbled, "Pretty fancy title." He shoved a big key in the door, pushed the door in, left the key stuck in the lock. He flipped on a light, and we were in an old-fashioned, large, one-room office. There was a desk, chairs, benches, filing cabinets, a phone, and a large safe at the wall opposite the entrance door.

I said, "It's a little eerie down here, isn't it, this time of night?"

"Naw. Why eerie?" He pulled open the bottom drawer of the desk and produced a bottle and a couple of tumblers. "It's scotch," he said. "That's your drink, ain't it?"

"What about you?"

"I can drink anything." He poured into the tumblers. "Want water with yours?"

"Please."

He went to a corner sink, turned the faucet, let the water run.

He came back and handed me the glass. He drank his neat. He pulled up a chair, sat, and put his legs up on the desk. He kept refilling the glass, drinking the whiskey like water. I sat on a wooden bench and used my drink nibblingly. He began to tell me stories of the sea, and an hour went by like that. Then the door swung open silently, and a man said, "Hi, skipper."

He had made no noise coming up. He was a lithe man, tall, and he needed a shave. He had black, quick-moving eyes, heavy black eyebrows, a square jaw, and a strong chin. He wore dark wide trousers, a black turtle-neck sweater, a pea-jacket and a seaman's visored cap. One hand was weighed down with a big valise.

The old man got his feet off the desk and stood up. I set my glass down on the bench and stood up too. The young man put down the valise and shook hands with old Ben. He said, "Hi, skipper," again, and then he said, "Who's your friend?"

"Pete Chambers."

"Well . . . I've heard of you." He stuck his hand out and I shook it. He said, "I'm Frank. The black sheep." He smiled. His teeth were white and large. He pushed his cap back on his head. His hair was black, thick and curly. He saw the bottle

on the desk, poured into his father's glass, drank to the bottom, and set the glass down with a bang. He said, "Okay. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We're going to talk, son. Now."

Frank pointed a thumb at me. "In front of him?"

"He's a friend. Ain't nothing you can say in front of me, you can't say in front of him. I don't care if you murder people, you can say it in front of him. He's a friend, and I trust my friends."

"Okay. Okay. He's a friend."

"Are we going to talk?"

"Sure. What's worrying you, skipper?"

"I don't think you're transporting legitimate goods, that's what's worrying me."

"Forget it."

"How'd you get into this anyway? What kind of a racket are you in? Where'd you get the money to buy your own freighter? And a house up in Scarsdale? And all the high living?"

"I haven't started yet." He bent to the valise, opened it, and brought out a steel strong-box. He put it on the desk, tapped it. "Take a look. Here's the proceeds of the cargo I freighted to South America . . . in cash . . . American bucks. You want to know how much? One hundred and fifty thousand clams, that's how much. And ten percent of it, net, after expenses, is mine. Not bad, huh? And it's going to get better. I'm working on that now."

"What do you do with it?"

"What?"

"The money."

"I put it into the safe, and I sit around. Then a phone call comes through. Then a couple of people arrive and take it away. Bad?"

"Doesn't sound good."

"It's going to get better."

"How?"

"A full partnership, that's how. You got an ambitious son, skipper." He moved with the strong-box to the safe. He knelt and began to twirl the dial. We watched him, all of us with our backs to the door. His tone was thoughtful as he said, "Suppose seventy-five thousand of that were mine. Seventy-five thousand dollars a trip. How's that sound, skipper?"

"Sounds like you're a thief. Sounds crooked, and crookedness has a way of bouncing back at you . . ."

A voice said, "It's bouncing right now." Before we could move, it came again, urgently. "*Don't turn around.* Or you catch a load of bullets that I guarantee don't bounce. Listen to a sample."

A shot sounded, and the smack of a bullet into a wall. The acrid smell of cordite filled the room. None of us moved. The voice said, "Okay, you down there with the box. Back it up, move it toward me, and *don't turn around.*"

The voice was a heavy, gutteral, half-whispering rasp; an unforgettable sound.

Frank moved the box back. The voice coached him. "A little more,

that's it, just a little more, nice and easy . . . okay, fine."

Frank said, "Can I talk?"

"Talk. But don't talk loud, pal."

"I'm talking to my father and his friend. I'm saying for nobody to get excited. People have worked it out. That box is insured. I don't want anybody making like a hero."

The voice said. "Smart boy. Stand up."

Frank rose.

"Okay. Now everybody put your hands on your heads. Fine. Now march forward right smack up against that wall and stay like that. Fine."

Then everything happened in a hurry. There were five quick shots. Frank fell. The door slammed. The key grated in the lock. Feet echoed in the hallway, running down the stairs.

The old man bent to his son, while I yanked at the door. It didn't budge. A car started up in the street, and pulled away with a scrape of tires.

"He's dead," the old man said. "He's dead."

I dialed the phone for cops.

6.

When Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker arrived, the door was open. I had found a key in Frank's clothes, poked the other key out, and opened the door. I had gone down and looked around but that was as futile as it sounds.

Parker's photographers and technicians had done their job, and then they and the corpse and the old man were gone. Parker poked a cigar in his mouth. "What do you think, friend?"

"Murder, Louis."

"What kind of murder, Pete? A homicide during the commission of a felony, or the other kind?"

"The other kind."

"But from what you've told me . . ."

"The guy had it done. Palance himself had spoken up and said he didn't want trouble. The guy had the box, and the key in the door, and three soldiers with their hands on their heads and their noses to the wall. He didn't have to shoot. Plus."

"Plus what?"

"Five bullets into one guy. Not one for me or the old man. Cold-blooded, premeditated, intentional murder."

"No question," Parker said. "You're a hundred percent right."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Parker said.

Cassidy, a young detective, pushed open the door. He winked hello at me. He said, "Frank Palance was the registered owner of the boat, Lieutenant." He put his hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a paper.

"What's that?" Parker said.

"Bill of lading, sir. It shows what the vessel was carrying."

"And what was that, Cassidy?"

"Rope, sir."

"Rope? Did you say rope?"

"That's right, sir. A thirty thousand-dollar consignment of rope."

I said, "What about that hundred and fifty thousand in the strongbox?"

Parker turned to me. "Did you see it? The money?"

"No."

"Then how do you know it was there?"

"I don't. But suppose that boat were carrying, how do you call it . . . contraband?" I looked toward Cassidy. "Is that freighter big enough to carry additional cargo?"

"Big enough to carry the Statue of Liberty. It's enormous."

Parker said, "It's a theory. Now what about you, Pete? What were you doing down here?"

"Came down with the old man."

"I know. Why?"

"I know a gal Palance was engaged to. They were scrapping. The old man's been a friend of mine for years. I went up and talked to him about that. He told me I was talking to the wrong guy, told me he was coming down here to see his son, asked me to come along with him. That's it."

"Okay," Parker said. "Let's get out of here. Keep available, Pete. Check in with me. Often."

It was a quarter to eleven when I leaned on the buzzer at Lola's apartment. She said, "Who is it?"

"Pete."

She opened the door and I smiled out loud. That girl went from great to greater. She wore ice blue satin, clinging lounging pajamas with the cleavage on top going down to the sash in the middle. She kissed me the moment the door closed behind me, her body softly pressed to mine, her hands around my neck. She didn't let go. I lifted her and carried her into the living room. She even knew how to be carried, her head hanging, her arms loose at her sides, her body pliant and yielding. I put her down, gently, on a wide divan, and sat beside her. I kissed her because her mouth and her eyes demanded that I kiss her. She sat up and said, "What's the matter?"

"Matter?"

"Your mind's not on kissing. You're not here. You're somewhere else." One corner of her mouth trembled. "Cooled off already?"

"Nope," I said. "Not that quick."

"Then what's the matter?"

I dug in for cigarettes, tapped out two, gave her one and lit them. I blew smoke.

She said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "Honey, you signed a contract with me."

"Contract?"

"The paper back there at the Lido."

"That. Look. If I can depend upon you to protect me from Frank, if I don't have to worry about a broken nose or losing an eye, then you're worth every penny of that percentage you arranged — which you'll never get anyway, because that policy's been switched. I *told* you."

"And the ring? And the Caddy?"

"I'll never return them. Believe me, I wasn't kidding when I said I earned them. And I don't want you to think I'm a bitch, because I'm not. It's the first time in my life I ever hung on to anything that somebody wanted back. But nobody's going to make a monkey out of me. Nobody."

"Nobody's going to."

She raised the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I'm not as bad as I sound. You've got to believe that." She looked away.

"I do." I put a finger under her chin and turned her face to me. "You don't have to worry about Frank any more, ever, all your life. And the ring and the Caddy are never going back."

A wrinkle came between her eyebrows. "I don't understand."

"He's dead."

Her hand flew to her mouth, pressing it in, distorting it. Her eyes, moving up to mine, held horror. "You killed him."

"No. No, I didn't."

The horror spread, and now it was fright, shock, bewilderment. The hand fell away from her mouth. I took the cigarette out of her fingers and rubbed it out in an ashtray.

"What happened?" she said.

I told her.

When I was through, the blood was out of her face and her fingers were trembling.

"You need a drink," I said. "Where do you keep it?"

She pointed at a door. I got up and went to it. It pushed through to a kitchen. A white closet over the washtub opened on many bottles. I poured a double hooker of brandy, brought it to her, made her drink it fast. Color came back to her cheeks. She said, "You . . . you might have been killed yourself."

"I might have. Part of the occupational hazard. When I'm working. For a fee. Fee." I sat down near her again. "That policy begins to take on some importance."

"But I told you —"

"I know what you told me. *You* told me. I'd rather have his insurance agent tell me. Or maybe I wouldn't. Do you know his name?"

She pushed fingers at her temples, squeezing in thought. She said, "He told me once. Let me think now." Then she said, "Keith, or Grant. I don't know. It's either Keith Grant or Grant Keith."

"That shouldn't be too hard to straighten out. Where's the phone book?"

She got off the divan and brought it to me. We stuck our heads together and looked. It was Keith Grant. There was an office and a home. It was too late for the office. I called the home. The phone rang for a while and then a sleepy voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Grant."

"This is he."

I knocked my voice down a couple of notches. Lola's ear was at the

receiver with mine. I said, "This is Mr. Palance."

"Frank?"

"No. Frank's father. Ben Palance."

"Yes, Mr. Palance?"

"Sorry to disturb you so late."

"That's all right, sir."

"It's about Frank's policy, Mr. Grant. He talked about a change in beneficiary, the day he sailed. Something about a young lady, Rose Jonas."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Change of beneficiary. He was in touch. Those were his instructions. Yes, sir. Rose Jonas."

"Thanks," I said, and hung up.

Lola said, "See?"

Glumly I said, "I see." I got to my feet.

"Where you going?" she said.

"Work."

7·

The Raven was more full of noise than a filibustering Senator. The act on stage was Rose Jonas singing *Stardust*. I had heard better, but I hadn't seen much better. She was put together like she was comfortable in bed, the naked part top-heavy, the rest of her, in no underwear, encased in a tight black sequinned gown. She had black hair, pulled around exposing one small ear, the rest of it in black curls over one shoulder. She had black enormous spread-apart eyes, hollows in her smooth dark cheeks, and a loose red passionate mouth. She sold sex right off the floor, every bulge of her visible under the baby spot. I couldn't much have blamed Frank Palance.

I found Tom Connors. I said, "I'd like to wait for gorgeous in her dressing room."

"Trouble?"

"Possibly. I hope not."

"Come on."

The dressing room was like every dressing room in every trap. A tumbled room with the sweet smell of cold cream and the triple-mirrored table with the lights. I smoked and waited and then she came. She saw me but she didn't say a word. She picked up a pack of long brown Shermans, lit one, drew heavy and smoked fast. She said, "What are you doing here?" She had a slow deep voice.

I said, "Frank sent me."

"Who?"

"Frank Palance."

"Who're you?"

"Pete."

"Pete who?"

"Just Pete."

"Frank sent you. For what?"

"I'm supposed to deliver a message."

"So okay. Deliver it."

"He's dead."

The brown cigarette stopped halfway up. The black eyes squinted. A red tongue came out of the big red mouth and wet the lower lip and stayed there. Then she said, "You want to talk?"

"Yep."

"Well, this ain't no place to talk. Let's get out of here."

"I'm with you, Rosie."

She killed the cigarette. She changed her dress. She slung a mink jacket over her shoulders, picked up a handbag out of a drawer, said, "Come on, Buster."

We went. By cab. To a tenement on the Lower East Side, Allen near Rivington, a ramshackle building that hadn't been painted in thirty years, the kind with the toilets in the halls. We went through a lobby that stank of ancient rats, turned right, and she stuck a key in the door. She made a lot of noise doing it. She opened the door and we went in. I went first.

It was a dirty old room, part kitchen, part parlor, with a couple of dirty old doors loose-hinged at the far wall. The only modern touch was a telephone stuck on top of a peeling, vibrating refrigerator. I turned to Rose.

Rose had a gun in her hand.

A competent little automatic.

It fit her.

She said, "You wanted to talk. Talk." She shook out of the jacket and let it fall to the floor. She dropped her open handbag on top of that.

"Frank's dead," I said.

"How do you know?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"That's a lie," she said. "It happened too late for the morning papers. It won't hit till tomorrow afternoon."

I said, "How do *you* know?"

She smiled. Then the smooth, thick red tongue flicked out again. She looked past me, at one of the doors. She called, "Whisper. Mosey out."

The door opened and a short fat man came through. He wore pants, nothing else. His belly came up to his chest, covered with hair. His feet were bare and dirty. His eyes were lost in the fat of his face, gleaming like an animal's, and the gleam was sharper, devouring, more like an animal, when he looked at Rose Jonas.

"Hello, Rosie," he said. "That's a cute dress. Is it a new one? I like that dress."

He said nothing about me, or the gun in her hand, but what he said was said in the buzz-saw voice that was more identification than fingerprints.

She pointed the gun at me. "Ever see this guy?"

Reluctantly, he moved his eyes off her, peered at me and smiled, one front tooth missing. His nose wrinkled. "Sure. He was one of them there, down by Frank's."

She came near me. "What's your name?"

"Pete."

"You told me that. Who are you?"

"Nobody."

"Open your jacket."

I opened my jacket. She put her free hand in, searching for identification. I was sorry before I did it. It

was like taking taffy from an octogenarian. I grabbed for the gun with my left, and jolted my right fist to her chin. She fell in a snoring heap on the mink jacket. Whisper may have had marbles in his head but every little marble understood the gun in my hand.

"Don't do nothing rash," he said. "Don't do nothing rash, fella."

"Nothing rash,' I said. "Except maybe spray some of your brains on the floor."

"Cut that out, mister. Please. Don't talk like that."

"Who do you work for?"

"Now, look, mister —"

"You look, pal. You killed a guy tonight. Remember?"

"That ain't for you to say."

"Ain't for me to say?"

"I'm entitled to a judge, and a jury, and a lawyer."

"Look," I said, "I want information. You're not the smartest guy in the world. You're the guy that shoots a bullet into a wall just to let us know you've got a gun, and two minutes later you're telling a guy not to talk too loud. But try to understand this. Try hard. Either I get information, or you get lead. It happens to guys . . . resisting arrest."

"Cop?"

"Private. Okay. The nickel's in the slot. Let's have the music."

"I work for Joe April."

"How long?"

"A couple of months."

"You from the Coast?"

"No." His voice lowered.

"Where?"

"Detroit."

"What's April's racket?"

"I don't know."

I didn't think he was telling the truth, but I wasn't pressing. I said, "Where's headquarters?"

"Flamingo Garage. Thirty-first and Ninth."

"All right. Now where's your heater?"

He pointed at the open door. "In the bedroom. In the rig."

"Move."

I walked with him into the filthy bedroom. His holster was caught around the brass bed-post of an old bed. I took his revolver out and marched him back to the kitchen. I said, "Sit down."

He sat.

Rose kept snoring on the floor.

I said, "What's your real name?"

With dignity he said, "Roderick H. Dallas."

I went to the refrigerator and for the second time that night I called cops, this time Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker in particular. Rose Jonas was still snoring when the sirens sounded in the street.

8.

I worked it out with Parker. It took a lot of coaxing, but I worked it out. It was a way of pushing through, right to the bottom, quick and with one shove. And it might work. It was better than a raid, and the onslaught of shysters with writs

of habeus corpus. And I didn't know these guys, and they didn't figure to know me. It took a lot of coaxing, but Parker was all cop, and he was keen enough to know it might work, it might push through, all the way, with one shove.

A cab took me up to the Flamingo Garage in fifteen minutes. It was quiet and dark with shuttered windows and a sheet-metal door pulled down. I pressed a bell at the side and listened to the clang inside. A little trap-door opened and a man said, "What do you want?"

"April."

"Who sent you?"

"Whisper."

The trap door snapped shut. There was silence. Then a whirring started and the sheet-metal door moved up high enough for me to enter. I went in. The door moved down and closed. The man said, "Come on to the office."

It was a big barn of a garage with no more than five cars, all fairly new and polished. The guy opened the office door and we went in. It was much lighter in the office. The guy leading me was swarthy, skinny and pock-marked. He wore a sharp, wide-shouldered suit, and a light gray snap brim hat. The man at the desk was different. He was slick, sandy-haired, impeccable in a white shirt with French cuffs, and the initials J.A. embroidered over the heart.

I said, "You Joe April?"

He said, "What's it to you?"

I said, "I'm in from Detroit. One day. I hustled up to see my pal, Roderick H. Dallas, commonly known as Whisper. He gave me the okay to you."

"For what?"

"Work."

"Now wait a minute. How do you know where Whisper holes up?"

"I've known Whisper since he was running around in bicycle stockings. We have frequent phone conversations."

"All the way from Detroit?"

"I can afford it. And Whisper, he tells me he's doing pretty good too."

"Okay. Let's have the rest of it."

"Ain't too much. I'm a little hot in Detroit, so I come east for a rest. I amble up to see my friend Whisper, and he tells me he's holed up for a while, blasted a guy tonight. He tells me maybe you can use me, so I come here. That's it."

He looked me over closely. He said, "You ever heist a car?"

"You kidding? I was heisting cars when Whisper was heisting his diapers."

"What's your name?"

"Scotty. Scotty Sanders."

"All right, Scotty." He reached for the phone, dialed, waited, said, "Hello? Hello, Whisper?"

You could hear Whisper's rasp across the room. "Yeah, boss."

"Got a friend of yours here."

"Who?"

"Scotty Sanders."

"Yeah, boss. A good kid."

The strain went out of April's face. He looked pleased. He wouldn't have looked as pleased, if he'd known that the muzzle of Parker's gun was tight to Whisper's temple.

April tried once more. "Where's he from, this fancy gorilla of yours?"

"Who?"

"This Scotty Sanders."

"From my home town. Detroit, boss. Very handy kid."

"Okay. Stay holed up. You'll hear from me." April hung up, nodded at the pock-marked man, nodded at me. "Jack Ziggy, Scotty Sanders."

We shook hands.

April said, "In a way, I'm glad you came. We're short a man with Whisper out. You and Ziggy are going to work together. Tonight. Okay with you, Scotty?"

"Okay if the pay's okay."

April nodded at Ziggy and Ziggy went out. I heard the sheet-metal door whir open, and then whir shut.

April said, "Sit down, kid."

"Thanks." I sat.

"Let me give you the picture, kid. We got a new twist on an old racket. We heist cars to order. We get orders from all over . . . out of the country, I mean. Mexico, Cuba, South America. They tell us what they want, just what they want. A green Buick convertible? That's it. A black Caddy sedan? That's it. Then we send out spotters, get the car we want lined up — and heist it, boom, like that. We touch them up maybe a little bit, and that's it. How's it sound?"

"Sounds good enough to me. How's the payoff? For the little guys, like me?"

He opened a drawer. It held a big blue automatic and a sheaf of bills. He drew out a few of the bills, said, "Here's five C's. That gets you on the pay-roll. You play ball . . . I'll make you fat. You louse it up . . . you're dead."

Softly I said, "Like Frank Palance?"

"That Whisper's got a big mouth."

"It ain't a big mouth when he's talking to me."

"Frank Palance. When a guy gets too big for his britches, he's through. And with me, there's no argument, no discussion, no nothing. When you're through, that's it. I put him in business — and I put him out of it. Only I wanted to do it myself."

"I don't get it."

He had blue eyes. He screwed them up at me. He said, "You ever figure Whisper for being gun-happy?"

"Not Whisper."

"Well, he pulled a wing-ding on me tonight. He had orders to pick up Palance and a box of dough and bring them both here to me. He brought the box, but he knocked off Palance, crazy-like. Maybe the guy would have had an out, which I doubt. Never had a chance to find out. Whisper got gun-happy. You think maybe Whisper's getting a little too nervous for his own good?"

"I don't know."

He laid the five bills on the desk. He said, "You see, that's dough.

There's plenty more. But don't go flipping your wig, like Palance. He was making a nice hunk of change. But all of a sudden, he wanted in. Instead, he got his head handed to him. Okay, kid. Take your dough."

I took it, stood up, put it into my pants' pocket.

The sheet metal door whirred, then whirred closed.

Jack Ziggy came in with the gun in his hand.

April said, "What goes?"

"I went over to check with Whisper, personally."

"Yeah?"

"No Whisper. No nothing. Lily filled me in on the rest."

"Who's Lily?"

"Owns the candy store across the street. They marched Whisper out. Cops marched him out. Marched out Rose Jonas too." He gestured with the gun. "This guy's a plant. Strictly."

April said, "Me and my big mouth. I'm doing this one myself." He reached into the drawer for the blue automatic.

These were not amateurs. There was no Rosie Jonas holding a gun like a cap pistol. This was a spot, and in a spot like this you're dead. You've got nothing to lose. I jumped him, right there and then, with the other guy holding a gun on me. I jumped him, the blue automatic in his hand. I did a dive as good as Lola Southern, a flat dive, with force, and me and the guy and the swivel chair got tangled on the floor, with Ziggy jumping around looking for an opening.

Ziggy thought he had it.

He let go twice, and killed his boss.

I had the blue automatic in my hand, and I used the body as a shield, and I missed twice, and then a slug caught me in the arm, and then another in the shoulder, and then I didn't miss. I opened a hole in his forehead, and the blood burst out like a red mask, and he dropped, and then I sprawled over the dead Joe April, and I tried to get up, but I couldn't . . .

9.

I sat slanted downward in the cranked-up bed, and I waited for them to show up, Parker and the cast of characters. I had no kick. I'd be out in three days. One bullet had gone clean through my left arm, and that was easy. They cleaned it, and closed it, and that was that. Not even a broken bone. The other one got stuck in a muscle near the lung, and that was lucky too. The lung was clear. They had to probe for that one, and they tell me it got a little nasty. That's why I was a hospital case. Three days.

I hadn't been able to sleep and a couple of thoughts had bounced around in my head, and then I had sat up and reached for the phone on the little table and I had called Parker, and Parker was bringing them to me.

Now.

I heard their feet in the corridor.

The first ones in were Parker and a long, gaunt, fleshless man. Parker introduced us. Keith Grant. Peter Chambers.

I had no time for pleasantries. I said, "Did Frank Palance's policy carry a double indemnity clause, Mr. Grant?"

"Yes, sir. It did."

"Have you got it?" I asked Parker.

"It's downtown. With his effects."

"Mr. Grant," I said. "Who was the beneficiary?"

"Originally?"

"Yes."

"Fanny Rebecca Fortzinrussell."

"*What?*"

"That's the name, sir. Fanny Rebecca Fortzinrussell."

"Okay. Then, on the day he sailed, three weeks ago, you got orders for a change of beneficiary. To Rose Jonas. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Sailing day's the busiest day. You mean to tell me that Frank Palance was able to get away to sit around to talk with you?"

"No. That's not a fact. He called me and gave me instructions. I prepared the papers for the change he requested."

There was a hole there. Big as the socket of a new-pulled tooth. I crossed my fingers. I said, "Did he sign those papers?"

"No."

No, he said. I blew out a lot of breath. That meant twenty thousand dollars to me. No, he said.

"Was he supposed to sign them?"

"Yes, sir. I had them all prepared. I expected to see him when he returned."

"Correct me if I'm wrong. But that leaves the policy in status quo. Does it not?"

"Yes, sir. It does."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks very much."

Parker marched him out, and marched back with Whisper, Rose Jonas, and a uniformed policeman.

Whisper said, "Geez, Mac, they get you bad?"

"They're going to get you worse, pal. You're going to fry."

He had clothes on now, shoes and a shirt and a crumby-looking jacket. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe. Shysters got tricks."

"There's only one trick that might get you off the chair, pal. And I got it."

"You got it, Mac? You got it for me?" A bit of drool leaked out from a corner of his mouth.

Parker creased his eyebrows. Rose Jonas lit a brown cigarette.

I said, "You gun-happy, Whisper?"

"Not me. Not Whisper."

"They're laughing at you, pal. They got you down as a nut. Gun-happy."

"Who? Who's laughing?"

"Everybody. All the boys. Joe April, Ziggy."

"You tangled with them, kid. Didn't you? That's how you got the slugs." He giggled.

Smart Parker. He hadn't told him about April and Ziggy. He hadn't

told Rose either. Smart cop, that Parker. He hadn't told either of them, the giggling Whisper, and Rosie with the cigarette under full control.

"They're laughing at you, Whisper. They figure you're washed up. They're making jokes about you. *She's* laughing too. Rose Jonas."

"Not Rosie."

"She says you're gun-happy too. She's making jokes with the boys, she's even making jokes with the cops. About you, sucker."

"Not Rosie. Rosie *knows* I ain't gun-happy."

"Shut up," Rose snapped.

Whisper turned his head to her. "Don't talk like that, Rosie."

"Shut up," she said.

I said to Parker, "Get her out of here."

Parker motioned to the cop. The cop took her out.

I said, "You're not gun-happy, are you, Whisper?"

"No, I ain't. And I don't like no jokes about it."

"Rosie's making the jokes, all over town. You're a sucker."

"Sucker, maybe."

"She talked you into it because it meant loot for her."

"Loot? How?"

"Frank's life policy. In her name. Did she tell you?"

"No."

"She cuts you out of the loot, and then she makes jokes that you're gun-happy. But you're not gun-happy, are you, Whisper? You let him have it because she told you to let him have it. Right?"

He said slowly, "Right."

"Now listen to me, Whisper."

"Yeah, Mac, I'm listening."

"You tell the truth, they might let you plead guilty to second. That gets you off the hot seat. It gives you life. Life, there's always the possibility of parole. She pushed you around, pal. You're supposed to push back."

"I'll push back," he said.

Parker took him out. There must have been more cops in the corridor, because Parker came back. "Nice work," he said. "The District Attorney'll love you."

"You think it'll stick?"

"Yeah. All we got to do is keep them apart. After we get his admissions, signed and sealed, hers will come easy. Thanks for a murderer, Pete. How'd you make it?"

"It didn't budge her when I told her Frank was dead. She knew it. She took me to where Whisper was holed up. She pulled a gun on me before I talked. When she wanted to know how I knew, I told her I saw it in the papers. She knew I was lying because she knew *when* he got it. How'd she know? Whisper didn't tell her. Whisper was holed up, and she was working at the Raven. Put that together with the way Whisper looked at her, and the fact that April told me he had specifically ordered Whisper to bring Frank in, not to gun him. You don't need a machine to add it."

"Sweet thinking, Pete. Nice work."

"Miss Southern out there?"

"Yes."

"Send her in, will you please, Louis? And with her I don't need any other company."

"Fine, Pete. Good night, and take it easy."

"Good night, Lieutenant."

10.

I was alone for a minute, then Lola came in, in a black suit and a high-collar lace blouse and a black beret on the side of her head. She walked on tip-toe, a little wan, a little worried.

"Are you all right?" she said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Be out of here in three days."

"Oh, I'm glad. Can I kiss you?"

"Lightly."

She kissed me. Lightly. It was the beginning of my convalescence.

I said, "Are you Fanny Rebecca Fortzinrussell?"

She blushed right up to the roots of her golden hair.

"Ain't it the craziest?" she said.

We laughed, together.

"Can you prove it?" I said.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For a hundred thousand dollars."

"For a hundred thousand dollars I can prove it, and I don't know if I'd prove it for anything less. You delirious?"

"Practically."

"How come?"

"Frank Palance know that Fortzinrussell label?"

"Yes he did. Happens it's my real name. Glamorous, isn't it. Why?"

"That's the name of the beneficiary of his policy."

"Only it was changed. To Rose Jonas."

"Not true."

"But the guy on the phone. The agent. Keith Grant."

"He had instructions for a change of beneficiary. He had prepared the necessary instrument, but Frank hadn't signed it. He was going to sign it, on his return, but he got killed too quick. Which keeps the policy as is, to the benefit of Fortzinrussell. Fifty thousand face, but when you get shot, it's accidental death, double indemnity, a hundred thousand dollars. Yours."

There was very little reaction. She said, "I'm not interested in that right now. I'm interested in you. Are you all right?"

"Fine, I told you. I'll be out in three days."

She bent to me and her lips brushed my ear. "I love you," she whispered. "I can't wait."

"I can't either, believe me."

A starchy nurse came in on rubber heels. "I think he's had enough," she said. "Every rule has been broken, what with police and things. He's had enough, Miss."

"I'll be around tomorrow, during regular visiting hours," Lola said. She kissed me again, not as lightly.

The starchy nurse ushered her out.

I settled back in the bed. I mused. I would be out in three days. Nice to be out in three days and have a shining blonde waiting for you. I mused some more. I thought about the first moment I had seen her as my eyes had flicked up from the crap game, and then the ride out to Lido, and the structure of that poised body high on the diving board, and the fingers ripping at the belt of the terry-cloth robe, and the glistening two-tone body, brown and white, brown and white . . .

She was a lot like me, she was no baby, she'd been around, a lot like me, quick, fast, impetuous, a hit and runner, hit and runner, hit hard and fast, and then run like hell. I wondered how long it would last, Lola Southern and Peter Chambers, but as long as it lasted it was going to go like a rocket, fun and fast, hit and run. I leaned over and opened the drawer of the little table and took out the contract she had signed in the bath-house at Lido. I read it, re-read it, patted it gently, and put it back in the drawer.

It represented twenty thousand solid simoleons.

Love is love, but a man has got to eat.

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Small Homicide

"When the guy fries," Pat said, "I want to pull the switch." But that was before he knew all the real facts.

BY EVAN HUNTER

HER FACE was small and chubby, the eyes blue and innocently rounded, but seeing nothing. Her body rested on the seat of the wooden bench, one arm twisted awkwardly beneath her soft little body.

The candles near the altar flickered and cast their dancing shadows on her face. There was a faded pink blanket wrapped around her, and against the whiteness of her throat were the purple bruises that told us she'd been strangled.

Her mouth was open, exposing two small teeth and the beginnings of a third.

She was no more than eight months old.

The church was quiet and immense, with early morning sunlight lighting the stained glass windows. Dust motes filtered down the long, slanting columns of sunlight, and Father Barron stood tall and darkly somber at the end of the pew.

"This is the way you found her, Father?" I asked.

"Yes. Just that way." The priest's eyes were a deep brown against the chalky whiteness of his face. "I didn't touch her."

Pat Travers scratched his jaw and stood up, reaching for the pad in his back pocket. His mouth was set in a tight, angry line. Pat had three children of his own. "What time was this, Father?"

"At about five-thirty. We have a six o'clock mass, and I came out to see that the altar was prepared. Our altar boys go to school, you understand, and they usually arrive at the last minute. I generally attend to the altar myself."

"No sexton?" Pat asked.

"Yes, we have a sexton, but he doesn't arrive until about eight every morning. He comes earlier on Sunday mornings."

I nodded while Pat jotted the information in his pad. "How did you happen to see her, Father?"

"I was walking to the back of the church to open the doors. I saw something in the pew, and I . . . well, at first I thought it was just a package someone had forgotten. When I came closer, I saw it was . . . was a baby." He sighed deeply and shook his head.

"The doors were locked, Father?"

"No. No, they're never locked. This is God's house, you know. They were simply closed. I was walking back to open them. I usually open them before the first mass in the morning."

"They were unlocked all night?"

"Yes, of course."

"I see." I looked down at the baby again. "You wouldn't know who she is, would you, Father?"

Father Barron shook his head again. "I'm afraid not. She may have been baptized here, but infants all look alike; you know. It would be different if I saw her every Sunday. But . . ." He spread his hands wide in a helpless gesture.

Pat nodded, and kept looking at the dead child. "We'll have to send some of the boys to take pictures and prints, Father. I hope you don't mind. And we'll have to chalk up the pew. It shouldn't take too long, and we'll have the body out as soon as possible."

Father Barron looked down at the dead baby. He crossed himself and said, "God have mercy on her soul."

We filed a report back at headquarters, and then sent out for some coffee. Pat had already detailed the powder and flash bulb boys, and there wasn't much we could do until they were through and the body had been autopsied.

I was sipping at my hot coffee when the buzzer on my desk sounded. I pushed down the toggle and said, "Levine, here."

"Dave, want to come into my office a minute? This is the lieutenant."

"Sure thing," I told him. I put down the cup, said, "Be right back" to Pat, and headed for the Old Man's office.

He was sitting behind his desk with our report in his hands. He glanced up when I came in and said, "Sit down, Dave. Hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm holding it back from the papers, Dave. If this breaks, we'll have every mother in the city telephoning us. You know what that means?"

"You want it fast."

"I want it damned fast. I'm pulling six men from other jobs to help you and Pat. I don't want to go to another precinct for help because the bigger this gets, the better its chances of breaking into print. I want it quiet and small, and I want it fast." He stopped and shook his head, and then muttered, "Goddamn thing."

"We're waiting for the body to

come in now," I said. "As soon as we get some reports, we may be able to learn something."

"What did it look like to you?"

"Strangulation. It's there in the report."

The lieutenant glanced at the typewritten sheet in his hands, mumbled "uhm" and then said, "While you're waiting, you'd better start checking the missing persons calls."

"Pat's doing that now, sir."

"Good, good. You know what to do, Dave. Just get me an answer to it fast."

"We'll do our best, sir."

He leaned back in his leather chair. "A little girl, huh?" He shook his head. "Damn shame. Damn shame." He kept shaking his head and looking at the report, and then he dropped the report on his desk and said, "Here're the boys you've got to work with." He handed me a typewritten list of names. "All good, Dave. Get me results."

"I'll try, sir," I said.

Pat had a list of calls on his desk when I went outside again. I picked it up and glanced through it rapidly. A few older kids were lost, and there had been the usual frantic pleas from mothers who should have watched their kids more carefully in the first place.

"What's this?" I asked. I put my forefinger alongside a call clocked in at eight-fifteen. A Mrs. Wilkes had phoned to say she'd left her baby outside in the carriage, and the carriage was gone.

"They found the kid," Pat said. "Her older daughter had taken the kid for a walk. There's nothing there, Dave."

"The Old Man wants action, Pat. The photos come in yet?"

"Over there." He indicated a pile of glossy photographs on his desk. I picked up the stack and thumbed through it. They'd shot the baby from every conceivable angle, and there were two good closeups of her face. I fanned the pictures out on my desk top and buzzed the lab. I recognized Caputo's voice at once.

"Any luck, Cappy?"

"That you, Dave?"

"Yep."

"You mean on the baby?"

"Yeah."

"The boys brought in a whole slew of stuff. A pew collects a lot of prints, Dave."

"Anything we can use?"

"I'm running them through now. If we get anything, I'll let you know."

"Fine. I want the baby's footprints taken, and a stat sent to every hospital in the state."

"Okay. It's going to be tough if the baby was born outside, though."

"Maybe we'll be lucky. Put the stat on the machine, will you? And tell them we want immediate replies."

"I'll have it taken care of, Dave."

"Good. Cappy, we're going to need all the help we can get. So . . ."

"I'll do all I can."

"Thanks. Let me know if you get anything."

"I will. So long, Dave; I've got work."

He clicked off, and I leaned back and lit a cigarette. Pat picked up one of the baby's photos and studied it glumly.

"When they get him, they should cut off his . . ."

"He'll get the chair," I said. "That's for sure."

"I'll pull the switch. Personally. Just ask me. Just ask me and I'll do it."

I nodded. "Except one thing, Pat."

"What's that?"

"We got to catch him first."

The baby was stretched out on the long white table when I went down to see Doc Edwards. A sheet covered the corpse, and Doc was busy filling out a report. I looked over his shoulder:

POLICE DEPARTMENT

City of New York

Date: June 12, 1953

From: Commanding Officer, *Charles R. Brandon, 37th Precinct*

To: Chief Medical Examiner

SUBJECT: DEATH OF *Baby girl (unidentified)*

1. Please furnish information on items checked below in connection of death of the above named. *Body was found on June 12, 1953* at *Church of the Holy Mother, 1220 Benson Avenue, Bronx, New York.*

Autopsy performed: examination made *Yes.* By: Dr. *James L. Edwards, Fordham Hospital Mortuary*

Date: *June 12, 1953* Where? *Bronx County*

Cause of death: *Broken neck.*

Doc Edwards looked up from the typewriter.

"Not nice, Dave."

"No, not nice at all." I saw that he was ready to type in the "*Result of chemical analysis*" space. "Anything else on her?"

"Not much. Dried tears on her face. Urine on her abdomen, buttocks and genitals. Traces of a zinc oxide ointment, and petroleum jelly there, too. That's about it."

"Time of death?"

"I'd put it at about three A.M. last night."

"Uh-huh."

"You want a guess?"

"Sure."

"Somebody doesn't like his sleep to be disturbed by a crying kid. That's my guess."

I said, "Nobody likes his sleep disturbed, Doc. What's the zinc oxide and petroleum jelly for? That normal?"

"Yeah, sure. Lots of mothers use it. Mostly for minor irritations. Urine burn, diaper rash, that sort of thing."

"I see."

"This shouldn't be too tough,

Dave. You know who the kid is yet?"

"We're working on that now."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks."

I turned to go, and Doc Edwards began pecking at the typewriter again, completing the autopsy report.

There was good news waiting for me back at the precinct. Pat came over with a smile on his face, and a thick sheet of paper in his hands.

"Here's the ticket," he said.

I took the paper, and looked at it. It was the photostat of a birth certificate.

U. S. NAVAL HOSPITAL

St. Albans, N. Y.

Birth Certificate

This certifies that *Louise Ann Dreiser* was born to *Alice Dreiser* in this hospital at *4:15 P.M.* on the *tenth* day of *November, 1952.* Weight *7* lbs. *6* ozs. In witness whereof, the said hospital has caused this certificate to be issued, properly signed and the seal of the hospital hereunto affixed.

Gregory Freeman, LTJG MC USN
attending physician
Frederick L. Mann, CAPTAIN MC
commanding officer USN

"Here's how they got it," Pat said, handing me another stat. I looked at it quickly. It was the reverse side of the birth certificate.

Baby's footprint
(Permanent Evidence of Identity)
Left foot *Right foot*

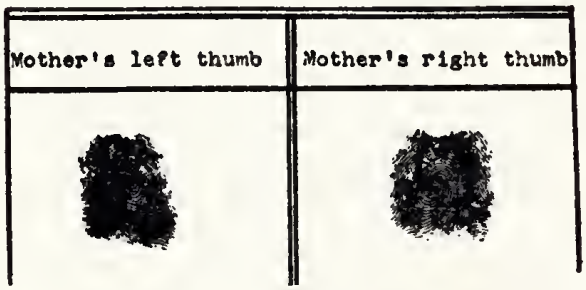
Sex of child *female*
Weight at birth *7* lbs.
6 ozs.

Certificate of birth should be carefully preserved as record of value for future use.

1 — To identify relationship
2 — To establish age to enter school

There were several more good reasons why a birth certificate should be kept in the sugar bowl, and then below that:

Official registration at *148-15 Archer Avenue, Jamaica, L. I., N. Y.*



"Alice Dreiser," I said.

"That's the mother. Prints and all. I've already sent a copy down to Cappy to check against the ones they lifted from the pew."

"Fine. Pick one of the boys from the list the Old Man gave us, Pat. Tell him to get whatever he can on Alice Dreiser and her husband. They have to be sailors or relations to get admitted to a naval hospital, don't they?"

"Yeah. You've got to prove dependency." He nodded.

"Fine. Get the guy's last address and we'll try to run down the woman, or him, or both. Get whoever you pick to call right away, will you?"

"Right. Why pick anyone? I'll make the call myself."

"No, I want you to check the phone book for Alice Dreisers. In the meantime, I'll be looking over the baby's garments."

"You'll be in the lab?"

"Yeah. Buzz me, Pat."

"Right."

Caputo had the garments separated and tagged when I got there.

"You're not going to get much out of these," he told me.

"No luck, huh?"

He held out the pink blanket. "*Black River Mills.* A big trade name. You can probably buy it in any retail shop in the city." He picked up the small pink sweater with the pearl buttons. "*Toddler's Inc.* — ditto. The socks have no markings at all. The undershirt came from *Gilman's* here in the city. It's the largest department store in the world, so you can imagine how many of these they sell every day. The cotton pajamas were bought there, too."

"No shoes?"

"No shoes."

"What about the diaper?"

"What about it? It's a plain diaper. No label. You got any kids, Dave?"

"One."

"You ever see a diaper with a label?"

"I don't recall seeing any."

"If you did, it wasn't in it long. Diapers take a hell of a beating, Dave."

"Maybe this one came from a diaper service."

"Maybe. You can check that."

"Safety pins?"

"Two. No identifying marks. Look like five and dime stuff."

"Any prints?"

"Yeah. There are smudged prints on the pins, but there's a good thumb print on one of the pajama snaps."

"Whose?"

"It matches the right thumb print on the stat you sent down. Mrs. Dreiser's."

"Uh-huh. Did you check her prints against the ones from the pew?"

"Nothing, Dave. None are hers, anyway."

"Okay, Cappy. Thanks a lot."

Cappy shrugged. "I get paid," he said. He grinned and waved as I walked out and headed upstairs again. I met Pat in the hallway, coming down to the lab after me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I called the Naval Hospital. They gave me the last address they had for the guy. His name is Carl Dreiser, lived at 831 East 217th Street, Bronx, when the baby was born."

"How come?"

"He was a yeoman, working downtown on Church Street. Lived with his wife uptown, got an allotment, you know the story."

"Yeah. So?"

"I sent Artie to check at that address. He should be calling in soon now."

"What about the sailor?"

"I called the Church Street office, spoke to the Commanding Officer, Captain . . ." He consulted a slip of paper. "Captain Thibot. This Dreiser was working there back in November. He got orders in January, reported aboard the U.S.S. *Hanfield*, DD 981 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on January 5th of this year."

"Where is he now?"

"That's the problem, Dave."

"What kind of problem?"

"The *Hanfield* was sunk off Pyongyang in March."

"Oh."

"Dreiser is listed as killed in action."

I didn't say anything. I nodded, and waited.

"A telegram was sent to Mrs. Dreiser at the Bronx address. The War Department says the telegram was delivered and signed for by Alice Dreiser."

"Let's wait for Artie to call in," I said.

We ordered more coffee and waited. Pat had checked the phone book and there'd been no listing for either Carl or Alice Dreiser. He'd had a list typed of every Dreiser in the city, it ran longer than my arm.

"Why didn't you ask the Navy what his parents' names are?" I said.

"I did. Both parents are dead."

"Who does he list as next of kin?"

"His wife. Alice Dreiser."

"Great."

In a half-hour, Artie called in. There was no Alice Dreiser living at the Bronx address. The landlady said she'd lived there until April and had left without giving a forwarding address. Yes, she'd had a baby daughter. I told Artie to keep the place staked out, and then buzzed George Tabin and told him to check the Post Office Department for any forwarding address.

When he buzzed back in twenty minutes, he said, "Nothing, Dave. Nothing at all."

We split the available force of men, and I managed to wangle four more men from the lieutenant. Half of us began checking on the Dreisers listed in the phone directories, and the rest of us began checking the diaper services.

The first diaper place I called on had a manager who needed only a beard to look like Santa Claus. He greeted me affably and offered all his assistance. Unfortunately, they'd never had a customer named Alice Dreiser.

At my fourth stop, I got what looked like a lead.

I spoke directly to the vice-president, and he listened intently.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps." He was a big man, with a wide waist, a gold watch chain spraddling it. He leaned over and pushed down on his intercom buzzer.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring in a list of our customers. Starting with November of 1952."

"Sir?"

"Starting with November of 1952."

"Yes, sir."

We talked about the diaper business in general until the list came, and then he handed it to me and I began checking off the names. There were a hell of a lot of names on it. For the month of December, I found a listing for Alice Dreiser. The address given was the one we'd checked in the Bronx.

"Here she is," I said. "Can you get her records?"

The vice-president looked at the name. "Certainly, just a moment." He buzzed his secretary again, told her what he wanted, and she brought the yellow file cards in a few moments later. The cards told me that Alice Dreiser had continued the diaper service through February. She'd been late on her February payment, and had cancelled service in March. She'd had the diapers delivered for the first week in March, but had not paid for them. She did not notify the company that she was moving. She had not returned the diapers they'd sent her that first week in March. The company did not know where she was.

"If you find her," the vice-president told me, "I'd like to know. She owes us money."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. I left him then.

The reports on the Dreisers were waiting for me back at the precinct. George had found a couple who claimed to being Carl's aunt and uncle. They knew he was married. They gave Alice's maiden name as Grant. They said she lived somewhere on Walton Avenue in the Bronx, or she had lived there when Carl first met her. No, they hadn't seen either Alice or Carl for months. Yes, they knew the Dreisers had had a daughter. They'd received an announcement card. They had never seen the baby.

Pat and I looked up the Grants on Walton Avenue, found a listing for Peter Grant, and went there together.

A bald man in his undershirt, his suspenders hanging over his trousers, opened the door.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Police officers," I said. "We'd like to ask a few questions."

"What about? Let me see your badges."

Pat and I flashed our buzzers and the bald man studied them.

"What kind of questions do you want to ask?"

"Are you Peter Grant?"

"Yeah, that's right. What's this all about?"

"May we come in?"

"Sure, come on in." We followed him into the apartment, and he motioned us to chairs in the small living room. "Now, what is it?" he asked.

"Your daughter is Alice Dreiser?"

"Yes," he said, his face unchanged.

"Do you know where she lives?"

"No."

"Come on, mister," Pat said. "You know where your daughter lives."

"I don't," Grant said, "and I don't give a damn, either."

"Why? What's wrong, mister?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. It's none of your business, anyway."

"Her daughter had her neck broken," I said. "It's our business."

"I don't give a . . ." he started to say. He stopped then and looked straight ahead of him, his brows pulled together into a tight frown. "I'm sorry. I still don't know where she lives."

"Did you know she was married?"

"To that sailor. Yes, I knew."

"And you knew she had a daughter?"

"Don't make me laugh," Grant said.

"What's funny, mister?" Pat said.

"Did I know she had a daughter? Why the hell do you think she married the sailor? Don't make me laugh!"

"When was your daughter married, Mr. Grant?"

"Last September." He saw the look on my face, and added, "Go ahead, you count it. The kid was born in November."

"Have you seen her since the marriage?"

"No."

"Have you ever seen the baby?"

"No."

"Do you have a picture of your daughter?"

"I think so. Is she in trouble? Do you think she did it?"

"We don't know who did it yet."

"Maybe she did," Grant said softly. "She just maybe did. I'll get you the picture."

He came back in a few minutes with the picture of a plain girl wearing a cap and gown. She had light eyes and straight hair, and her face was intently serious.

"She favors her mother," Grant said. "God rest her soul."

"Your wife is dead?"

"Yes. That picture was taken when Alice graduated from high school."

"May we have it?"

He hesitated and said, "It's the only one I've got. She . . . she didn't take many pictures. She wasn't a very . . . pretty girl."

"We'll return it."

"All right," he said. His eyes were troubled. "She . . . if she's in trouble, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"We'll let you know."

"A girl . . . makes mistakes sometimes." He stood up abruptly. "Let me know."

We had copies of the photo made, and then we staked out every church in the neighborhood in which the baby was found. Pat and I covered the Church of the Holy Mother, because we figured the woman was most likely to come back there.

We didn't talk much. There is

something about a church of any denomination that makes a man think rather than talk. Pat and I knocked off at about seven every night, and the night boys took over then. We were back on the job at seven in the morning.

It was a week before she came in.

She stopped at the font in the rear of the church, dipped her hand in the holy water, and crossed herself. Then she walked to the altar, stopping before a statue of the Virgin Mary, lit a candle, and kneeled down before it.

"That's her," I said.

"Let's go," Pat answered.

"Not here. Outside."

Pat's eyes locked with mine for an instant. "Sure," he said.

She kneeled before the statue for a long time, and then got to her feet slowly, drying her eyes. She walked up the aisle, stopped at the font, crossed herself, and then walked outside.

We followed her out, catching up with her at the corner. I walked over on one side of her, and Pat on the other.

"Mrs. Dreiser?" I asked.

She stopped walking. "Yes?"

I showed my buzzer. "Police officers," I said. "We'd like to ask some questions."

She stared at my face for a long time. She drew a trembling breath then, and said, "I killed her. I . . . Carl was dead, you see. I . . . I guess that was it. It wasn't right . . . his getting killed, I mean. And she was crying."

"Want to tell it downtown, ma'm?" I asked.

She nodded blankly. "Yes, that was it. She just cried all the time, not knowing that I was crying inside. You don't know how I cried inside. Carl . . . he was all I had. I . . . I couldn't stand it any more. I told her to shut up and when she didn't I . . . I . . ."

"Come on along, ma'm," I said.

"I brought her to the church." She nodded, remembering it all now. "She was innocent, you know. So I brought her to the church. Did you find her there?"

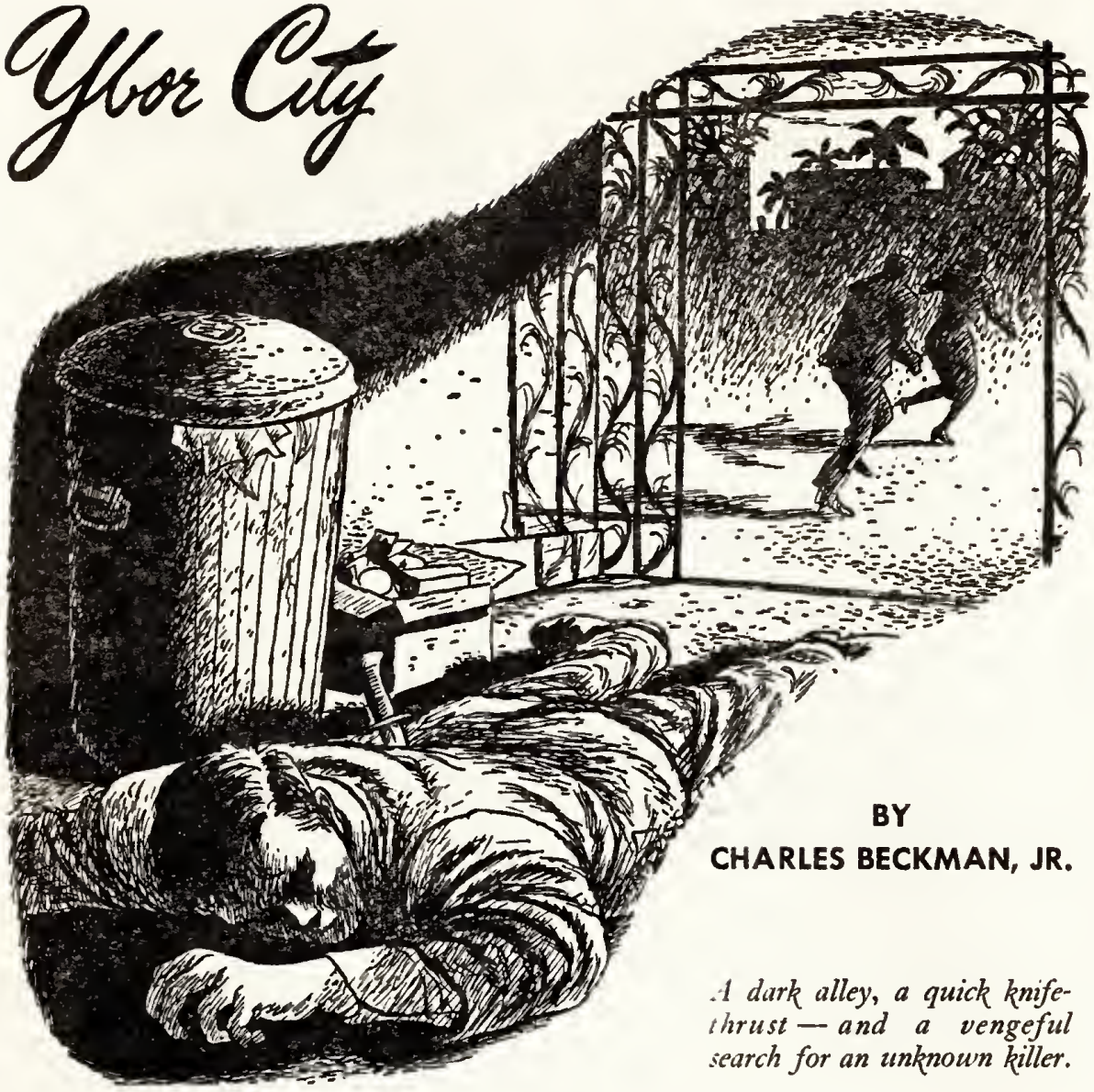
"Yes, ma'm," I said. "That's where we found her."

She seemed pleased. A small smile covered her mouth and she said, "I'm glad you found her."

She told the story again to the lieutenant. Pat and I checked out, and on the way to the subway, I asked him, "Do you still want to pull the switch, Pat?"

He didn't answer.

Ybor City



BY
CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

A dark alley, a quick knife-thrust — and a vengeful search for an unknown killer.

IT HAPPENED in an alley in Tampa, Florida, in the squalid Ybor City district. One minute he was a man, smoking a cigarette, waiting for me in the humid summer night. The next, he was a corpse, falling over with a knife in his back.

I never saw his killers at all, except for two blobs of shadow in the stinking blackness of the alley. One of them was a woman. She collided with me, giving me the feel of her softness and the smell of her cheap perfume. Then she was gone.

Something had spun out of her hand when she plowed into me. I groped around for it. My hands came in contact with a woman's small

purse. Quickly, without looking at it, I stuffed it in my coat pocket. Then I walked down into the black maw of the alley where the dead man lay.

Stuccoed walls, crumbling with age, formed canyons around me. Outlined against the starry summer sky was filigreed iron grill work around a balcony, and the leaves of a banana tree waving above a courtyard wall.

The corpse was heavy, like an inert sack of potatoes. I shoved and wedged it into a doorway, and then I walked back to the mouth of the alley, lighting a cigarette. I was standing there, casually smoking, when the patrolman came up with his flashlight.

"Evening, officer," I said.

He shoved the blinding light across my face. When he got it out of my eyes, I could see by the glow of a streetlight that he was young and freckle-faced, built like a Notre Dame tackle.

I inhaled a lungful of smoke, let it drift away. His light whipped down the alley, crawled over garbage cans, packing crates, bundles of paper, went over the spot where the dead man had sprawled, and then made a circuit of the fire escapes and balconies.

"Something the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know. I thought I heard something. Some kind of yell. What're you doing here?"

"Just walking around. I heard it, too. In the alley. A couple of cats fighting, I think. They make the damnedest sounds. Like a woman getting raped."

He relaxed a little. "Yeah." He shoved the flash into his belt, lit a cigarette. Then he took out a handkerchief and mopped his freckled forehead, pushing his cap back. "God, it's hot tonight."

"Not a breath stirring," I agreed.

"Yeah, I guess that's what it was. Cats, I mean. We got a couple of old alley Toms in my neighborhood. Keep me awake squalling and fussing every night."

"They can raise a lot of hell, all right."

He stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. "You better not hang around here by yourself," he said in a friendly tone. "Lousy part of town. One of these cigar rollers might slug you."

I shrugged and moved away from the alley. I walked down the street and crossed over to a drug store. Like the rest of Ybor City, it was all Spanish. A placard in the window said, *English Spoken Here.*

For a long time, I stared at the window. Then I walked into the place and examined some magazines. After a bit, I went out on the sidewalk again. The young cop had disappeared. The street was empty and lonely. I stepped back into the store, dropped a coin in a pay phone and called a taxi. Then I walked quickly back to the alley.

The dead man was where I had left him, doubled over in the door-

way. His skin felt clammy and damp to the touch. I lifted him, draped one of his arms over my shoulder and dragged him out of the alley. His head bounced and rolled and his hand flapped like a dead fish.

I stood there, holding him at the alley entrance. I was afraid to put him down because the taxi might come any minute and I was afraid if I stayed with him, the young beat cop would come by again, making his rounds.

So I stood there, sweating, my muscles aching, and cursed taxi companies. Finally, the cab turned a corner and rolled slowly down the street. I whistled and he pulled into the curb and opened a door.

I grinned and staggered, putting on a drunk act. In the darkness, the murdered man could pass for a friend who'd had more than his limit.

I got the corpse in the back of the car and slid in beside him. In a drunken voice, I mumbled at the driver to take us down to the Bay.

While he drove, I fumbled through the dead man's pockets, but found nothing. Finally, we reached a sandy strip under some waving palm trees, and the taxi driver stopped. I handed him a crumpled bill and dragged the corpse out again, thankful for the darkness here.

The driver stuck his head out. "Hey, he looks like he's in bad shape. You better get him to bed."

"Can't hold his liquor. . . ." I said thickly.

The man shoved his head out a couple more inches. "You look like you got blood on your face."

"Cut myself shaving," I said. "Beat it, friend."

He stared at me, his face a white blur in the night. Suddenly he started looking scared. He jerked his head back in like a frightened turtle, raked the cab into gear, and got out of there.

I dragged the murdered man along the beach. This was a lonely section: a few dark fishing shacks, some palmettoes, and a row of boats tied up at a rotting pier, slapping and bumping softly in the wash of surf.

I carried and dragged the dead man until my shoulder sockets were almost pulled apart and the sweat was a dripping, slimy film all over my body.

Finally I got down to the little cabin cruiser that had brought me across the bay from St. Petersburg earlier this evening. I worked the dead man on board and into the cabin. Then I went over him again in the darkness. With a pocket knife, I ripped out his pockets, the lining of his coat. He was clean. Not a thing on him.

I played the light of a small flash over his face. An aspen of a man, thin-boned and dissipated; pinched features with an angular design of sharp bones under tight skin.

I straightened my back and swore softly in the darkness. The muggy Florida night answered me across

the licking water with mocking silence.

Then I remembered the girl's purse. I took it out of my coat pocket and emptied its contents on a bunk, and snapped on the flash again. It was a tiny bag, the kind women take with them in the evenings, that contain the bare essentials of make-up. This one had a compact, a balled Kleenex smeared with lipstick, a package of Camels with two cigarettes remaining, a gold lipstick case, and a paper book of matches.

The lipstick had a name engraved on it: "Lolita." The matches bore a picture of a nude blonde sitting in a champagne glass, underneath which some printing assured the reader that the food at *Sagura's* was the best in Ybor City.

I wedged the murdered man in the cruiser's toilet and locked the door. I didn't want the police finding him yet. It would louse up the whole show, because he was not the man doing the blackmail. He had only been the boy who ran errands. True, he could have given me the key to the situation. But the big shot had gotten to him first, tonight, and stuck a knife in him. I needed more time — something I wouldn't have if this dead man became police property and Grace Perring's blackmail became a newspaper scandal.

So I went back to Ybor City, the Latin quarter that extended two miles east from Nebraska Avenue and south to Ybor estuary.

I returned and hunted up Sagura's, a typical Spanish restaurant, a place that cooked chicken and rice, yellow with saffron, black-bean and garbanzo soups, steak catalana, crawfish and spaghetti served with wine. I ordered a bottle of wine and sat at a table under potted rubber plants and watched a string band play Cuban music.

I turned over one of their paper book matches and looked at the picture of the nude blonde sitting in the champagne glass.

"Lolita been around tonight?" I asked the waitress who brought my wine.

She put the wine down and gave me a fleeting glance. "*Yo no se.*" She shrugged and went away. But in a little while the manager of the place came around and sat at my table. He was a fat man with a round face that looked like a greasy coffee bean. He mopped at it with a white handkerchief.

"This is a hot one," he said, sighing.

I drank the wine, looking at him. The band was playing a rhumba. A girl dressed in a spangled bra and ruffled split skirt came out on the floor and began shaking her rear.

"The waitress. She said you asked about Lolita." He looked around at the floor show, trying so hard to appear casual it was ludicrous.

I nodded and lit a cigarette.

"You are a friend of Lolita?" he asked. The sweat was coming through his seersucker coat.

"Maybe," I said. "What difference does it make?"

He made an elaborate shrugging gesture, ducking his bullet head between bulging shoulders and pushing fat, brown palms upward. "Please, Señor. I am not what you call sticking my nose in your business. Only, well, Vellutini — he's a powerful man around here. . . ." His voice trailed off with another shrug of his fat shoulders.

I nodded. "Of course." I drank some more of the wine, and wondered who the hell Vellutini was. "It isn't important. About Lolita, I mean. I'm related to her by marriage. Knew her when she was a kid in another part of the state. Just thought I'd look her up while I was in town." I said it flatly, casually, as if the subject no longer interested me.

The cafe manager stood up. "Well," he said, "she comes around here sometimes. But I haven't seen her in several days." In parting, he added, "You might try the place she works in daytime, the Veloz-Rey cigar factory. . . ." And he walked off.

I paid for the wine and left the place.

It was past midnight now and I thought I had better not go back to the boat. So I wandered around until I found a cheap hotel on a dim street, where a man could rent a room for a dollar and a half a night. I bought another bottle of wine in the store just off the lobby and went up.

I lay there, in the hot, stinking night, with the wine bottle on the bed beside me, and, in my rig, the heavy .45 that I had brought along to kill a man.

It was close to noon the next day when I awoke. After dressing, I walked down to the Veloz-Rey cigar factory. I needed a shave and my gray suit was rumpled and the collar of my shirt had soaked itself into a shapeless rag.

Veloz-Rey was one of the many factories of its kind in this part of Tampa. Smaller than most, it was housed in a time-blackened brick building. A rickety stairway led up to the main factory room on the second floor.

Here, the cigar makers, the *tabaqueros* who rolled the cigars, worked at long tables in double rows.

One of them was the woman who had helped kill a man in an Ybor City alley last night. . . .

I wandered among the workers, trying to attract as little attention as possible. Near the water cooler I started a conversation with one of the "strippers" who had paused for a drink. It was the stripper's job to remove the stems from leaves and pass the tobacco on to *boncheros* who made up the inside *tripa* or filler of the cigar.

"Lolita?" he said. Then he grinned knowingly. "Oh, *si*, that one." He nodded toward the *tabaqueros*. "The little one with the pointed chibabbies." He took a frayed cigar out

of his wet mouth and spit on the floor. "Somebody tell you about her . . . ?"

But I was already moving down the long rows of double tables. Here, the men and women bent over their monotonous tasks, with slim, skillful fingers whipping the tobacco into shape. A radio was on, giving the news in Spanish.

I stopped behind the woman, Lolita. She was young, about twenty and her skin was the color of a dusky rose. Perspiration made her forehead shiny, soaked through her blouse, and ran in tiny drops down the shadowy valley of her bosom. The straps of her brassiere cut into the soft flesh of her shoulders under the filmy blouse.

She worked with a steady, detached rhythm.

An oscillating fan revolved in my direction, carrying to my nostrils a heavy, familiar perfume. And I knew I had the right woman.

"Lolita," I said softly, and put a hand on her shoulder.

She gave a little jump, and her head twisted around. I got the full force of her huge black eyes.

She stared at me for a moment, with her wide black eyes, and then she took my hand off her shoulder. "I'll have you fired, you bastard," she told me softly.

"I don't work here. I came up to ask you for a date."

She looked me over speculatively. Her lips curled. "You wouldn't have the price of a drink."

"I thought maybe we could talk. You know, about the little game you were playing in the alley last night. . . ."

As I said that, very softly, I dropped the lipstick in her lap. No one around heard what I said, but she heard all right. Her face lost its color. A drop of sweat ran down her cheek. She spread her fingers fanwise over her thigh, covering the lipstick, and she shivered. I bent over her and put my hand back on her shoulder, rubbing the soft flesh under the blouse with my fingers. I let my fingers trail around to the front of her blouse. "You want to tell me where you live, honey?"

She stared up into my eyes as if fascinated by them. Her lips drew back in a stiff grimace, showing the gleam of even, white teeth behind them. I thought for a moment she was going to be sick right there. But she gave me the address in a husky whisper.

"I'll see you there tonight after you get off work," I said. "And I wouldn't mention it to anybody, honey. There's no telling how much trouble it might cause you . . ." I smiled at her, and then I turned and walked out of the place.

I went down the street and found myself a bar. I sat there, drinking steadily, looking somberly at the glass and nothing else.

I sat there until dark and then I went up to Lolita's room. I hugged the gun under my left arm, feeling the good, hard outline of it.

She opened the door. Now, she had bathed and there was a flower in her dark hair. She looked fresh in a clean skirt, stockings, ankle-strap shoes and a crisp blouse with a low neck.

She was a hell of a good-looking woman, and they *were* pointed.

"Hello, honey," I said.

She looked at me.

I pushed her aside and went into the room. "I don't guess you mind if I look around." Hand on my gun, I went into the kitchen, a cubicle of a room with a pile of dirty dishes on the tile sink. One of them was a plate with yellow egg stains; the other, a half empty cup of coffee with a cigarette butt floating soggily in the cold, black liquid. I looked into her closets, the bedroom, the bath. Then I returned to the living room.

She sat on the couch and lit a cigarette nervously. Her skirt was tight across her thighs and an inch above her knees.

I helped myself to a can of beer.

Her sombre eyes flicked across my face. "So you were there . . . in the alley last night?" she asked. "What did you see?"

"I saw a man die," I told her, sipping the beer.

Her face was like a poker player's now, stiff and pale with nothing inside showing. It might have been carved out of wax. She raised one dark, plucked eyebrow. "That was important to you? Men die all the time." She waited.

"I know," I answered her.

"This one was a friend of yours?"

"He was nothing to me."

She snubbed out her cigarette in a cracked saucer on the table. Then she moved closer to me on the couch. Her fingers touched my arm and her thighs pressed against mine. "Maybe you will forget this — this little thing you saw in the alley? Maybe," she said softly, "Lolita can make you forget?"

"Maybe you can," I said. I put the beer down.

She was suddenly breathing hard, her sharp bosom straining against the flimsy covering.

I touched her thigh, feeling the roll of her stocking top under the tight skirt. A little moan escaped her lips. "Wait, honey. . . ." she whispered. She caught the "V" collar of her blouse in each hand and opened the buttons down to her waist. Then I reached for her and felt warm, satin-smooth flesh quivering under my hands. I pressed her back against the arm of the couch. She was twisting and moaning under me, damp with perspiration.

Then, suddenly, I wrenched her over, so that I had her right hand pinned under me. I grasped for her wrist, twisted it until I heard the clatter of steel on the floor.

I jumped up and kicked the little knife under the couch.

She sat up and buried her face in her hands. Her black hair fell over her finger tips. In the struggle, her dress had been torn and shoved up to

her hips. Her bare thighs gleamed whitely above the stocking rolls that dug into soft flesh.

I grabbed a handful of her hair and threw her head back. "So he told you to handle it alone," I said. "The man in the alley with you last night — you told him I'd talked to you. So he told you to get me busy on the couch and stick a knife in my back."

She looked up at me with her sweat-slick face, a pulse in her throat fluttering wildly, and said nothing.

I hit her across the face, twice, back and forth, so hard that her teeth clicked together and blood splattered on her naked breasts.

"I want his name, Lolita. You'll give it to me if you want to have any face left."

She panted with a hoarse animal sound. "Vellutini. Mike Vellutini."

The name the restaurant owner had mentioned.

"He your boy friend?"

She nodded.

"The dead man," I went on. "He was working for Vellutini, but he was just the errand boy, right? He collected the money from Grace Perring. But your Mike Vellutini is the real blackmailer. He's got the pictures that are making this Perring dame pay off. Yes?" I gave her hair another twist.

She cried out with pain. "Yes," she said. "Mike found out Joe was going to double-cross us. He was going to tell Mrs. Perring, or somebody she sent, where the negatives were and who the real blackmailer was — for a sum. We followed him to the alley and got to him first —"

"And your sweetheart — Mike Vellutini? Where will I find him?"

"He has a little night club. He runs a bolita game in the back room." She told me an address.

I threw her back on the couch and started for the door, but she caught up with me.

"Wait," she said. "Wait. Don't leave me now." Her fingers clawed at me. She started crying, her mouth working. "Mike made me stand there and watch while he stuck a knife in Joe's back last night so I'd see what happens to anybody who crosses him."

She said, "I'm scared of him. God, I'm scared of him. He's a fat, stinking pig. I hate him and I'm afraid of him."

Then her arms went around me, tightly, pressing her breasts against me so hard they burned through my shirt. "You're not afraid of him," she whispered, "or you wouldn't be tracking him down like this. Please, please take me away from that fat pig before he kills me. Take me out of Ybor City. I'll do anything for you . . ."

She raised her face and there was a mixture of stark fear and animal lust in her eyes. Then her mouth was against mine, hot and alive, like her trembling body. Her tongue darted out and her hands pulled at my clothes. . . .

I walked through the hot night with the woman smell still clinging to my body. It had been hard to make Lolita stay back at the room, and I succeeded only when I told her I was going to Vellutini's. She wasn't kidding about being afraid of him.

As I walked, I took the gun out and checked its magazine. Then I flicked the safety off, nestled it back in the shoulder rig and went on through the narrow, sweltering streets to the jook place that Mike Vellutini ran. The place where one night a few months ago a St. Petersburg society woman had been indiscreet with one of her many boy friends. Vellutini had gotten pictures of her, drunk and in bed with the man. And now he was making her pay through the nose to keep the picture under wraps.

Clever, though, Vellutini had never let it be known that he was the blackmailer. Always, the man whom Lolita had called Joe had contacted the woman for the money. He carried prints of the pictures. That was all.

I had come across the bay from St. Petersburg as an agent for Grace Perring to meet the man in the alley. I had brought with me a large sum of money to give him for the information that I now had for nothing. . . .

I went into Mike Vellutini's, a place of thick smoke, dark shadows, hot Latin piano, and cheap liquor. An evil hole on a back street where men and women from across the bay could come and hide their sins in sweltering private rooms that Vellutini rented for a high price.

I walked across the floor and somewhere above me, in the layers of yellow smoke, a ceiling fan turned apathetically, casting a shadow, helpless in the muggy heat.

Nobody stopped me as I wandered through the place, into the back room, a closed den, rancid with the odors of stale smoke, beer, and the sweat from men's bodies. The men sat around under a single light, suspended from the ceiling by a drop cord and covered with a green shade . . . mostly Negroes from the docks and Latin cigar workers, playing bolita. The room held its breath while the little balls, consecutively numbered and tied in a bag, were tossed from one person to another. The players sat, dripping sweat, their teeth clamped on cigars, staring at the sack. They smoked, spit on the floor, and cursed while they waited to see if the ball clutched through the cloth would bear their winning number.

I didn't know the face of the man I was looking for, so I drifted through the crowd, seeking a clue to the owner of the place.

I moved down a hallway toward the men's room. A door opened and a man came out into the hall. He was fat and greasy and dirty. I could smell him from ten feet away. He was dressed in an undershirt, a limp grey rag, soggy and stained with sweat, and he had a towel around his

neck to soak up the sweat that ran down the thick, red creases of flesh. Beside the undershirt, he was wearing baggy seersucker trousers and tennis shoes.

His eyes were buried deep in soft pads of flesh, two glittering black marbles that studied me carefully. "You want someone?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Mike Vellutini," I said, and felt the weight of the gun under my left shoulder.

"Yeah?" He moved his cigar from one corner of his heavy, wet lips to the other. "About what?"

"Business, you might say."

His voice sounded like a flat tire rumbling over hollow pavement. "Come in here." He turned his back on me and lumbered into the office room.

I followed. It was a small, hot place like the other rooms. A French door opened out onto a courtyard where banana trees stood motionless in the still night.

The heavy man sat down behind his desk on a creaking swivel chair. He picked up a palmetto leaf and fanned himself while he looked at me through the cigar smoke with his shiny marble eyes.

"Go ahead," he rumbled. "I'm Mike Vellutini."

I sat on a chair, keeping my coat loose so the gun would come out fast. I went right to the point. "Several months ago," I said, "a woman, Grace Perring, came over from St. Pete with a man who was not her husband. During the night they were in a number of places in Ybor City. She was too drunk to remember any of them. But in one of the places, she and this man were in bed and somebody took their picture. A week later, a thin little man came to call on her with prints of this picture. He represented another man who wanted a large sum of money not to show the picture to her children and friends. He kept coming back for money until it was more than she could pay. I came over to find the real blackmailer."

Vellutini sat behind the desk with an amused look on his face. "So now you find him. Me — Vellutini." He laughed, and sucked hungrily at the cigar. "Yes, that was a good picture. She sure was enjoying it, that blonde bitch. What a wrestle she was giving him!" He laughed some more, with his flabby lips around the cigar. "So why you risk your neck, you dumb flatfoot? Money? Or did that blonde bitch offer to pay you off the way she's been payin' off all those other guys in St. Petersburg?"

I shrugged. "Let's say she has some nice kids. Three of them." I reached for my gun, feeling a little tired.

Vellutini might have looked fat and lazy but he wasn't dumb. While he flicked the palmetto leaf with his right hand, his left had crept below the level of the desk to an open drawer. Now it sprang out and there was a very heavy revolver in it, pointed at me.

We both fired the first shot to-

gether. Mine didn't miss. I followed it with a second.

A pair of red roses blossomed out on Vellutini's soggy undershirt, then dissolved and ran down over his fat belly. He grunted, staring at me stupidly, his slobbery lips hanging open. Slowly, he rose to his feet, knocking the chair over behind him. He stood there for a second, swaying, staring at me. Then he fell across the desk with a crash.

Quickly, I dragged out desk and file drawers, pawing through them while voices murmured in the hall and fists beat against the door.

In the bottom of one drawer I found what I wanted, a snapshot negative. Even in the undeveloped negative I could recognize Grace Perring, and see the drunken, animal pleasure on her face as the man with her fondled her.

I stuffed it into a pocket and went through the French doors, through the courtyard and out into the dark streets.

I walked down through the stinking alleys of Ybor City toward the boat. I still had a body to bury out in the bay on my way back to St. Petersburg, and I still had to phone Lolita and warn her to say she knew nothing if the police questioned her.

Inside, I felt tired, dirty, and defeated. It would be nice, I thought, to stick around this Ybor City and the hot-blooded Lolita, who was mine for the asking.

But I had to get home to the quiet hell I lived in, across the bay.

I had to go on protecting, the best I knew how, the lives and happiness of three wonderful children whose mother was Grace Perring—my wife.

MANHUNT'S

Movie of the Month:

RKO-RADIO'S

The Hitch-Hiker

Directed by **IDA LUPINO** *and Starring* **EDMOND O'BRIEN, FRANK LOVEJOY, WILLIAM TALMAN** *with* **JOSÉ TORVAY**

EVERY once in a great while, a movie will come along, quietly and unheralded. There will be no advance ballyhoo, no Hollywood shouts of "Terrific! Stupendous!" Just such a "sleeper" is THE HITCH-HIKER.

It deals with two ordinary men on a fishing trip. The men stop to pick up a hitch-hiker, only to discover he's an escaped convict and murderer who intends killing them at the end of their long trip to Mexico. The journey is loaded with terror and suspense as the desperate madman seeks escape; the Mexican police behind him every inch of the way.

For a movie as unexpectedly exciting as a shot in the dark, *Manhunt* enthusiastically recommends Ida Lupino's THE HITCH-HIKER. Don't miss it!

Venuti was a good bodyguard.
He was loyal right to the end,
no one could deny that. . .

BY
RICHARD DEMING

The Loyal One

THE ROAD, even in good weather, must have been little more than a trail. Now, covered by nearly a foot of snow and with the depth increasing by the minute, Cynthia realized it would have been impassible for a lesser car or a lesser driver. Even with its special chains and with Johnny Venuti at the wheel, it seemed a miracle to her the big sedan was able to go on.

From the back seat she strained to peer past Johnny's shoulder at the road ahead, but by now the distance the yellow fog lights were able to probe through the steadily thickening curtain of falling snow had become so slight, the hood obstructed what little of the road could be seen from the back seat. Involuntarily she gave a frightened little whimper, and her husband at her side squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"We'll make it, baby," he said. "Johnny could drive through a swamp at midnight easier than most guys can drive on a flat road at noon. Hey, Johnny?"

"We'll make it, Mrs. Ross," the driver said in a relaxed voice. "It's only about another mile."

Ashamed of her whimper, Cynthia sank back against her husband's shoulder. But when she spoke, her voice was fretful. "Even if we do, we'll be trapped for the winter.

We'll never get out of these mountains until it thaws."

"Thawing will start within six weeks," Harry Ross said in the same reassuring voice. "And we don't *want* to get out before then. There's enough wood and food in the cabin to last twice that long. And remember, if we can't get out, nobody can get in to us either."

"We should have headed for Canada," Cynthia said. "We should have taken a chance."

"I know what I'm doing, baby. It wouldn't have been a chance. When Masters points his finger, your only chance is to disappear. Completely. Nobody but me and Johnny knows I got this hunting cabin, but syndicate guns will be checking every other spot in the country I ever been to. In six weeks they'll be tired of looking and we'll have a chance to sneak out of the country."

Sneak, she thought. Run like a frightened rabbit. The mighty Harry Ross turned coward.

No, she corrected herself instantly, it was not cowardice. Even when the guns sounded he had not exhibited fear. Retreat in the face of invincible odds was merely good sense. But the catastrophic sense of loss remained with her. Where was the glamorous life she had visualized as a top racketeer's wife? What good were diamonds and a mink coat in an isolated mountain cabin? Would the showers of expensive gifts, the gay times she had enjoyed for only three short months ever return?

I wish I were back at the hospital passing bedpans, she said to herself, and then the thought of her past nursing career reminded her of her current nursing problem.

"Your leg," she said to Harry. "Suppose it gets infected?"

Harry emitted an indulgent laugh. "That's why I married a nurse, baby. There's a first aid kit in the cabin, and it's up to you to see it don't get infected."

"I'm not a doctor," she said dubiously.

The car made a slow right turn, crept on a few yards and stopped.

"What's the matter?" Cynthia inquired anxiously.

In a matter-of-fact voice Johnny Venuti said, "We're there."

He pointed left, and when Cynthia rubbed a clear place in the fogged-over window with her glove, she could dimly make out the silhouette of a small cabin not more than a dozen feet away.

"I'll leave the motor running and you people sit here where it's warm until I get a fire going," Johnny said. "It must be around zero out, and it's probably just as cold in the cabin."

He slipped from the car quickly, but the momentary opening of the door allowed in a cold blast which caused the couple in the rear seat to shiver. For a few minutes neither the man nor woman spoke.

Cynthia, depressedly musing on the bleak prospect of their self-imposed imprisonment, found the

stealthy thought creeping into her mind that it would be even bleaker if Johnny Venuti were not along. Instantly she combatted the thought by inducing in her mind synthetic dislike of the lean bodyguard. He *looked* at her, she told herself righteously. His face always respectful, of course, but unable to hide completely the suppressed hunger deep in his eyes.

Then, in an unexpected flash of honesty, she admitted to herself she had caught the same look, not even suppressed, in the eyes of many other men without getting upset. What disturbed her about Johnny was her irrational response. For every time she sensed his hidden hunger, she was forced to strangle an equivalent sense of hunger in herself.

Perversely, in an attempt to convince herself she disliked Johnny, she said, "Why did we have to bring *him*, Harry?"

Her husband glanced at her in surprise. "Who would have driven otherwise, Cyn? You, who can't park without denting a fender? Or me, with a bullet hole in my leg?"

When she made no reply, he asked, "Don't you like Johnny?"

"Of course," she said quickly. "I just thought. . . won't it be kind of crowded? The cabin doesn't seem very big."

"It isn't. But we'll manage. Take it easy on Johnny, Cyn."

"What do you mean?" she asked with a touch of panic, fearing he had detected her unconscious reaction to Johnny's glances.

To her relief he said, "I mean don't act like you resent his presence. Johnny means a lot more to me than just a bodyguard, and I mean a lot more to Johnny than just his boss. He'd risk his life for me, baby. In fact he has more than once. He did again yesterday when Master's hood put that bullet through my leg. It's bad enough for him to be stuck up here all winter. Don't make it worse by making him feel uncomfortable."

She said in a low voice, "I like him all right, Harry."

At the sound of the trunk lid being raised, both turned to peer through the rear window. Johnny was dragging out suitcases and staggering toward the cabin with them.

A few minutes later the bodyguard slid into the front seat, his clothing covered with snow. "Everything set," he said, and switched off the ignition.

There was something final in the sound of the motor dying. Up to that instant there had been a slim hope in Cynthia's mind that Harry would abandon the idea of using the mountain hideout and they would start back to civilization. The hope died with the motor.

With Cynthia supporting his weight on one side and Johnny supporting him on the other, they managed to get the wounded man into the cabin. When they had eased

him onto one of the two built-in double-decked bunks, Johnny rushed back to the door, slammed it against the encroaching cold and bolted it. Cynthia shook the snow from her mink coat and then stared around her in astonishment.

The cabin consisted of only one room of about nine by twelve feet. One wall was entirely taken up by the two double-decked bunks. The opposite wall was piled from floor to ceiling with cut firewood. A single narrow window next to the door by which they had entered looked out from the front wall, and the rear wall contained another door in its center.

To one side of the rear door was an old-fashioned cookstove, at the moment emitting a satisfying glow of heat. To its other side was a small metal sink without taps, and whose drain spout led to a bucket beneath it. Over the sink was an open tier of shelves containing dishes, pots and pans, and an enormous supply of tinned foods.

The only other furnishings were a wooden table, four wooden chairs, a galvanized washtub and an old-fashioned bedroom commode. Light was furnished by a gasoline-mantle lamp hung from the ceiling, and in lieu of closet space a few bent coat hangers dangled from nails in the walls.

Watching his wife's expression with wry amusement, Harry said, "Not exactly the Waldorf, is it?"

She turned to look down at him. "I didn't expect running water and electricity, Harry. But good God! You expect us to live six weeks in this small space?"

When he merely continued to regard her with amusement, she pointed at the rear door. "Where does that go?"

"Outside, baby. Fifty feet away you'll find the outhouse. It's small, only a one-holer, but it's built snug and it's got a little kerosene stove in it."

"Good God! There's not even a curtain to draw. How am I supposed to take a bath?"

Harry pointed to the galvanized tub. "You fill that with snow and put it on the stove. Don't worry about Johnny. He'll turn his back."

Cynthia's gaze moved to the square features of the gunman, who looked back at her without expression. But in his eyes she detected the same faint look of hunger with which he always regarded her, and quickly she averted her own eyes for fear he would be able to read the responsive hunger in them.

"Sure, Mrs. Ross," Johnny said quietly. "I'll turn my back."

The room by now had become comfortably warm. Shrugging out of his topcoat, Johnny hung it from a nail on the wall and turned to help Cynthia off with her coat. With her back to him, she felt his knuckles rub along the silk covering her arms as she slid from the coat, and the contact sent a terrifying sweep of fire through her whole body.

As Johnny carefully hung the coat on a hanger, Harry regarded his wife admiringly. She was a beautiful woman, with delicate features, an over-ripe mouth, a pale, milk-white complexion emphasized by jet black hair, and a perfectly proportioned body. Cynthia was proud of her body and proud of the hold it gave her over her middle-aged husband. She started to respond to his admiring glance by flattening her stomach and thrusting her firm breasts outward to make the thin silk of her dress outline her figure in detail. But when Johnny turned around, she abruptly let her shoulders slump and folded her hands demurely in front of her.

Together she and Johnny helped Harry remove his topcoat, suit coat and shoes, so that he lay on the bunk in only shirt and trousers.

"Now loosen your belt so I can pull off your pants," Cynthia ordered. "I want to give that wound a decent dressing."

Obediently Harry did as directed and she pulled his trousers down below his knees. In the center of his right thigh was a blood-soaked rag bandage.

Carefully she pulled it loose and looked down with pursed lips at the purple-ringed hole. Ordering the wounded man to roll on his side, she examined the puckered but clean exit hole on the back of his thigh.

"Heat some water," she told Johnny without looking at him. Rising, she began poking through the first aid kit attached to the wall next to the front door.

Twenty minutes later Harry Ross, freshly bandaged, sat upright on his bunk wearing clean pajamas and sipping a cup of coffee. His wife and Johnny Venuti sat on opposite sides of the table with cups before them also. Johnny had removed his suit coat to disclose a leather shoulder harness containing a German P-38 with a transparent grip.

Cynthia's eyes rested idly on the gun, traveled to the bodyguard's powerful shoulders and then to his square, expressionless face. There was strength in that lean body, she was thinking. Ruthless, almost animal strength. Fleetingly she imagined his arms crushing her against him, and was horrified that the thought created a guilty feeling of pleasure.

"Something bothering you, baby?" Harry asked.

Swiftly she jerked her gaze from Johnny. "I just wondered why Johnny has to keep wearing that gun up here," she improvised.

"Force of habit," Johnny said. Slipping off the harness, he hung it from the back of his chair.

"I never saw a gun grip like that before," Cynthia said. "Is that a picture on it?"

Instead of answering, Johnny glanced questioningly at his boss.

"She's a big girl," Harry said. "Show it to her."

Slipping the automatic from its holster, Johnny removed the clip

and ejected the shell in the chamber. He offered it to Cynthia, butt first.

"It's a war souvenir," he said. "The Kraut it come from must of cut the side grips out of plexiglass from the cowling of a crashed plane, and put those pictures under the plexiglass. Maybe she was the Kraut's girl."

The pictures under the transparent side grips were of a plump, full-bosomed blonde, the one under the right grip a front view and the one on the left a rear view. Both were full-length photographs and in both the girl was stark naked. Cynthia handed the gun back without comment.

"I got it off my captain at Cassino," Johnny said. "Best officer we ever had, Captain Grace. I'd of followed that guy straight into hell."

"I thought you said it came from a German," Cynthia said.

"Yeah, the captain found it on a dead Kraut, and when the captain died, I got it off him. Funny thing, the way it happened."

The bodyguard stared down at the gun in his hand, and when neither Cynthia nor Harry commented, he said, "We was on a patrol and the old man got out ahead of us. We saw him get hit, but just then a couple of Kraut machine guns started sweeping the area between us and Captain Grace. The sergeant was all for getting the hell out of there, but I could see the captain leaning back against a pile of rocks, and he didn't look dead to me. So I went after him. Still don't know how I made it there and back. It was three hundred yards through machine-gun fire with hardly any cover."

Cynthia, who had been listening intently, stared at him with dawning understanding of her husband's regard for the lean gunman. Her normal sense of guilty uneasiness in his presence was replaced by a feeling of astonished respect.

"That must have taken remarkable courage," she said.

Johnny considered this with evident surprise, as though it had never previously occurred to him. Finally he said in a tone which indicated he thought the explanation should have been obvious, "He was my captain."

After a moment he added, "Never forget what he said when I showed up. He kind of smiled and said, 'I might have known you'd be along, Johnny. But it's no use. I'll be dead in ten minutes.' He wasn't lying. He was totally paralyzed from a hole square in his center, and the minute I saw his wound, I knew it would kill him to move him a foot."

Again he gazed down at the gun he was holding. In a reflective voice he said, "Funny part about it, two minutes later he was cussing my brains out."

Both members of his audience looked at him without understanding.

"Because I took the gun," Johnny explained. "When he felt me pulling it out of his holster, he got it in his head that's all I'd come after. Christ,

as though I'd crawl three hundred yards through machine-gun fire after a lousy gun. I never even thought of it until I saw the captain was a goner. But when I crawled away he called me every kind of name he knew. He was still swearing when I got out of earshot."

Cynthia said blankly, "But, Johnny, if it upset him that much, why didn't you leave it?"

"What good was a gun to a dead man?" Johnny asked with genuine astonishment. "I was just being practical. Christ, if I could of changed places with the captain, I'd of been glad to watch *him* crawl away, but there wasn't anything I could do for him. I always liked this gun. Lot's of times before the captain got killed I used to wish it was me who had found that dead Kraut instead of him."

Harry said with a mixture of wonder and affection, "Johnny, you've got the damndest philosophy I ever heard of."

The tale left Cynthia more confused about Johnny than ever, for it revealed a mixture of courage, loyalty and ruthlessness which hardly seemed compatible in the same person. Deliberately she wrenched her mind from him by leaving the table to examine the galvanized washtub. Harry's eyes followed her.

"Cynthia wants her bath," he said to Johnny. "Come hell or high water, Cynthia wants her bath seven nights a week. As a student, they called her 'Sanitary Cynthia'."

"What's wrong with liking to be clean?" Cynthia asked.

Without having to be requested, Johnny did the preliminary work necessary to taking a bath under primitive conditions. Going outdoors with the galvanized tub and a snow shovel, he returned with the tub half full of snow, dragged it across the floor and heaved it up onto the stove.

It took nearly an hour for the snow to become hot water. When its temperature finally satisfied her, Johnny lifted the tub from the stove to the floor. Then he seated himself at the table with his back to the tub and began to lay out a deck of cards for solitaire.

Cynthia was acutely conscious of the size of the room as she began to undress, for the position of the table in the cabin's center placed Johnny's back not more than three feet from the tub. Nevertheless she had no intention of going bathless for six weeks, and decided she might as well steel herself to the unconventional circumstances from the beginning.

She did hurry, however, and she bathed as quietly as possible, hoping the absence of splashing would make Johnny less conscious of her nakedness immediately behind him. From his bunk Harry watched this struggle between modesty and hygiene with evident amusement.

It was not until she had stepped from the tub and was rubbing herself down with a towel that she re-

membered the window directly in front of Johnny. Against the blackness outside it acted as a dull mirror in which she could see her reflection clearly. As she looked, she met the reflection of Johnny's eyes staring straight at her, and quickly covered herself with the towel.

Johnny's eyes dropped to his cards and he did not look up again as she slipped into the thick flannel nightgown. She had picked it out when they stopped to buy sufficient clothing to last their stay at the cabin. Barefooted she ran to her bunk and slipped beneath the covers.

Silently Johnny rose, dragged the washtub to the front door and emptied it into the night.

That night it stormed. The earlier snowfall had been windless, the flakes settling straight down like an endlessly unrolling curtain. But during the night wind began to whisper about the eaves and steadily increased its force until it screamed and howled like a million caged animals.

When Cynthia awoke at seven in the morning, Harry was still asleep and breathing heavily, but Johnny was gone from the cabin. He had rebuilt the fire, for the room was pleasantly warm. She took advantage of his absence to dress quickly in woolen slacks and ski boots she had bought for the winter siege, and pulled over her head a tight-fitting turtle-necked sweater with long sleeves.

She washed briefly in cold water from a bucket next to the sink, brushed her teeth and had just finished brushing her hair in the small shaving mirror over the sink when Johnny came in the back door. He was dressed in hunting pants and leather knee boots, a Mackinaw coat and a woolen cap with ear muffs, and he carried the snow shovel.

Stomping snow from his boots, he said, "I cleared a path to the outhouse and lighted the kerosene stove. It's stopped snowing finally."

As she made her way to the outhouse Cynthia discovered the snow either side of the path Johnny had shoveled reached clear to her shoulders at one spot, but at another place faded in depth to below her knees. Glancing at the surrounding country, she realized the night wind had piled snow in the drifts which might vary from a matter of inches to spots where it would be over her head. It was cold, still hovering around zero, but the sky was clear with the promise of sunshine and the air was entirely still.

When she returned to the cabin Harry was still asleep and she let him sleep until she had warmed herself with a cup of coffee.

Then she poured some cold water into a bowl, added boiling water from the kettle on the stove and carried the bowl over to Harry's bunk, where she set it on a chair close to the bunk. Over the back of the chair she placed a neatly folded towel and wash cloth.

"What you doing?" Johnny asked.

"I'm going to give him a bed bath and change his dressing."

Gently she shook Harry awake. He looked up at her dully and licked at lips she suddenly noticed were dry and caked. Quickly she laid a hand across his forehead.

"You've got fever," she said. "A lot of fever. I wish I'd thought to buy a thermometer when we stopped for clothes."

"Get me a drink of water, baby," Harry said thickly.

He drank two glasses, which seemed to make him feel better and removed the thickness from his speech, but his forehead remained hot to the touch. Johnny Venuti watched interestedly as Cynthia stripped her patient and gave him a bed bath with such dexterity not a drop of water spilled on the blankets.

As Cynthia removed the old wound dressing, her face grew momentarily pinched when she saw the inflamed area around the wound and the narrow red streak leading upward along Harry's thigh toward his groin. Harry noticed the streak at the same time.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Just an after-effect of your wound," she said calmly. Reaching down, she grasped his bare big toe and gave it a sharp pinch. "Feel that?"

"Not very much," Harry said. "My foot feels kind of numb."

Without comment Cynthia redressed the wound and helped Harry back into his pajamas. As Johnny handed the wounded man a cup of coffee, she walked to the window and stared out at the sedan. It was nearly buried in a snowdrift which covered it clear to the top of the windshield.

Abruptly she turned around and announced with loud calmness, "You've got septicemia, Harry. Blood poisoning."

Both men stared at her.

"How far is the nearest telephone?" she asked.

"Twenty miles," Johnny said. Walking to the window, he swept his gaze over the jagged white landscape, then turned and glanced about the room. "We should have brought snow shoes, boss."

Harry merely watched his face quietly.

In the same unnaturally loud voice in which she had made her announcement Cynthia said, "There's nothing I can do with only a first aid kit. Without antibiotics and blood transfusions he'll be dead in a matter of days. He'll probably die anyway unless we get him to a hospital by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Again Johnny's eyes searched the countryside through the window. "Even a tank couldn't get up here through this snow," he said. "Some of those drifts must be twenty feet deep. It will take a helicopter, providing I can get hold of one."

He crossed the room, pulled on a thick sweater and donned his Mackinaw over it. Cynthia and Harry

watched silently as he selected a number of chocolate bars from one of the shelves over the sink and thrust them into his coat pocket. Then he removed a flyrod from the wall, stripped off its reel and laid the reel on the table.

"You won't make it, Johnny," Harry said in a low voice.

Johnny made no reply, but he flashed Harry a look which was a mixture of assurance and the unvoiced understanding that exists between men who possess a deep and mutual personal attachment. Then he walked to the door, pulled it open and was confronted by a wall of snow nearly waist high. For a moment he seemed taken aback, but with a slight shrug he plowed through, dragging the door shut behind him.

Through the window Cynthia watched his slow progress. A few yards from the cabin the snow became only knee deep and he stopped to brush himself off. Then he probed ahead with the flyrod, jabbing it through the crust clear to the ground before every step. He had traveled no more than a dozen yards when he encountered a hole which swallowed the rod clear to its handle. Withdrawing it, he probed again until he located solid foothold and moved slowly on.

Behind her she heard Harry's teeth begin to chatter.

For the next eight hours Cynthia alternately combatted Harry's chills and fevers, one moment burying him under blankets and the next bathing his fevered body with cool water, pouring more into him in an attempt to satisfy a raging thirst, and placing snow packs on his brow. The chills were less frequent than the fevers, the latter, which she estimated by feel might run as high as 105 degrees, being her most constant foe.

By the middle of the afternoon the patient's right foot and lower calf had turned a dull purple and there was an inflamed area four inches in diameter around his wound. From it a thick red streak ran clear up his thigh to his groin.

Most of the time Harry lay torpid, conscious but seemingly in a stupor. Occasionally he roused enough to say that his leg hurt or ask for water, and even during his torpid periods he was able to respond to questions and seemed vaguely aware of what was going on. In spite of his high fever there was no indication of delirium.

From the moment Cynthia had announced he had blood poisoning Harry accepted the situation without complaint, understanding at once his sole hope for life lay in Johnny's ability to reach the phone. But despite this understanding the suspense of waiting seemed to weigh less heavily on him than upon Cynthia. As the hours passed she found herself visualizing Johnny tumbling into bottomless snow drifts which smothered him, or wandering lost and eventually lying down to freeze.

During one such period of anxiety she was guiltily horror-stricken to realize she was not thinking at all of the inevitable consequences to her husband if Johnny failed to get through, but her sole fear was that Johnny would die.

When light began to dim inside the cabin, she took down the gasoline lamp, pumped it full of air and lighted it. She had just hung it back on its hook when Johnny returned.

The bodyguard entered even more abruptly than he had left, flinging open the door, letting the flyrod drop loosely from his hand and staggering forward to fall flat on his face. Cynthia shut and bolted the door, then turned to assist him, but he had already climbed to his feet and reeled to the table, where he collapsed with his head in his arms.

It took thirty minutes of thawing and four cups of coffee to get Johnny in shape to report. And when he finally was able to speak, he merely said in a weary voice, "I didn't get there," and collapsed full length on Cynthia's bunk, unable to make it into his upper berth.

From his own bunk Harry eyed his bodyguard dully and without recrimination, then turned to gaze at his wife. With blunt fatalism he asked, "How long will I last, baby?"

"Don't talk like that!" Cynthia said hysterically.

At nine o'clock, after three and a half hours sleep, Johnny suddenly rolled from Cynthia's bunk, crossed to the sink and washed his face in cold water. He seemed fully refreshed from his eight-hour ordeal when he walked over to look down at Harry.

"Sorry, boss," he said in a quiet voice. "Snowdrifts have changed the whole shape of the country, and with snow on them every one of these hills looks alike. I couldn't recognize a single landmark. I was out seven hours when I cut my own trail and realized I had circled back to within a mile of the cabin."

"It's all right, Johnny," Harry said dully. "Most guys wouldn't even have tried."

"You don't have to look so resigned about it, boss. Just because I walked in a circle today doesn't mean I won't follow a straight line tomorrow."

Cynthia felt her heart begin to pound at the words. Johnny intended to try again in the morning. He meant to battle engulfing snow and zero weather not only tomorrow, but again and again until he either got through or died trying.

Suppose he had not circled at the precisely lucky arc which led him back to his own trail only a mile from the cabin, she wondered? Suppose nightfall had caught him wandering in the vast expanse of snow? Her reasoning told her it would be inconceivable for him to have the same blind luck twice.

Terror-stricken by the direction her thoughts were taking, she found herself deliberately weighing her husband's life against Johnny's. If

Johnny *did* manage to get through, Harry still probably would survive. But if Johnny failed, both men would die.

She came to a decision.

"You'd be wasting your time, Johnny," she said in a thin voice. "He's so toxic now, even a hospital couldn't save him."

Johnny stared at her. After a long time he said, "Maybe you could be wrong. Even doctors make mistakes."

"Not about septicemia," Cynthia said soberly. "I've been a registered nurse for five years, Johnny. I know when blood poisoning has reached the point where it's hopeless."

Wordlessly he continued to stare at her for another full minute. Finally his face blanked of all expression.

Walking over to the table, he said, "How about food?"

In a trancelike state of mental exhaustion she heated him a can of stew and made him a pot of coffee. While he ate, Cynthia made Harry as comfortable as she could.

When Johnny finally pushed back from the table, he dragged the galvanized washtub from its corner, lifted the snow shovel and went out the front door. Within minutes he was back with a half tubfull of snow. Cynthia watched wide-eyed.

Then he looked at her, and the hunger in his eyes was flaunted. She backed from the look.

"I'm . . . I'm not going to take a bath tonight, Johnny."

Johnny raised his eyebrows. Then he glanced at Harry, but the old expression of respect and understanding was gone from his eyes. The glance was a dismissal, the callous appraisal of a corpse.

"How long will he drag it out?"

Cynthia licked her lips. "A few days. A week. Maybe longer."

"I'm not waiting a week," Johnny said. He walked toward her slowly and she backed until she was pressed against the upright at the foot of her bunk. His eyes moved over her tight turtlenecked sweater, down along her woolen slacks to her ski boots and up along her body again.

"Take your clothes off," he said.

The words aroused Harry. "What was that?" he asked.

Ignoring him, Johnny continued to stare at Cynthia. She whispered, "Not in front of him, Johnny. Good God! Not right in front of him!"

"Take your clothes off!"

"Why, you Son . . .!" Harry said weakly. "No-good, lousy Son . . .!"

When Cynthia merely continued to stare at Johnny from overlarge eyes, he suddenly landed his palm across her cheek with such force she was knocked sprawling on her bunk.

"This is the last time. Take them off or I'll rip them off."

She stared up at him in unbelieving fascination. But as his hands tensed to reach for her, she sat up with a shudder, leaned forward without taking her enormous eyes from his face, and with unsteady fingers slowly began to unlace her boots.

From the other bunk the shriek of profanity lifted to a crescendo.

The Faceless Man

BY

MICHAEL FESSIER

Every town has a faceless man.
That man could be you.

At one time if anyone had suggested that the residents of Green Valley could conceivably form themselves into a mob, lusting for the blood of a fellowman, I would have called him insane. Now I know better. Green Valley isn't in the Deep South; it's in a midwestern farming state, which proves that lynching isn't a fault of geography but of humanity, And humanity happens to be a family we all belong to no matter where we live. To those of you who have read about lynchings committed in places far from your homes and who have wondered what sort of a person a lyncher is, I have this to say: A lyncher is neither tall nor short, nor young nor old, nor male nor female, and he is faceless, but, under certain given circumstances and under certain given conditions, he is you and you and you and, yes, he is even me.

The chain of events which led the citizens of Green Valley a long way back down the path of evolution toward their original animal state began during the hot, dry summer when their crops were withering and they were worrying about their mortgages and other debts. Henry Rankins gave them something to talk about other than their troubles by taking Claude Warren, an ex-convict, into his home to live with him and help him run his farm. Claude was hardly more than a kid and his crime had not been committed against us nor among us, but he had served eight months in State's Prison and that was enough to set public opinion against him right from the start.

Perhaps the feeling against Claude might have been passive rather than active if it had not been for Orry Quinn. Orry was the third of Pete Quinn's shiftless sons and he had been employed as a farm hand by Henry Rankins until a week before Claude came along. Henry had fired Orry for general reasons of incompetence and, specifically, for having wandered off one evening to see his girl, leaving the cows in the shed restless and in pain from not having been milked. Any other farmer would have done the same thing under the circumstances and nobody would have been perturbed about Orry's being unemployed, a condition which had grown to be more or less chronic with him anyway, had not Orry seized the opportunity to become a self-constituted martyr to social injustice. He claimed he had performed his labors faithfully and well, only to be removed on a trumped-up charge to make room for a felon, an ex-convict and, for all anybody knew, a potential murderer. This story was accepted at face value by most of the younger and more discontented non-working citizens of the community, and even men of substance and intelligence, who normally wouldn't have accepted Orry's sworn oath as to the date of his birth, began to place credence in it. Green Valley was composed of a close-knit group of families and they believed in taking care of their own. Whether or not they sympathized with Orry, they found it hard to understand why Henry Rankins would have passed up an opportunity to give a native son much needed employment in favor of an outsider who happened, in addition, to be a criminal.

Finally a small delegation called at Henry's farm to seek the answer. They found Henry in a shed cleaning eggs and placing them in cartons. Helping him was Claude Warren. Claude was a husky, clean-cut, tow-headed kid not much different than dozens of others in Green Valley, excepting that his skin was pale and there was a half-apologetic look in his eyes.

Henry, a small old man with wrinkled, leathery skin, seemed to know why the delegation was there.

"Would you mind taking a walk, son?" he said to Claude. "I think my good friends and neighbors want to have a talk with me."

Claude nodded, then hurried away, his head hanging as if he, too, knew the reason for the visit. Then Henry faced his friends and neighbors.

"Hello boys!" he said blandly. "How're things? How's crops? Been working hard? Been borrowing money from the bank? How much? Got any insurance in case you kick off and leave your families without support?" As he talked, his eyes seemed to be boring into those of each individual member of the group. "How're you getting along with your wives?" he went on. "Any truth to the rumor that one of you slapped his old lady in front of the kids? And how about your daughters? Do you know where they are of nights and what they do?"

He paused and waited as the others shifted their feet uneasily in the dust, avoided his gaze and remained collectively silent.

"You seem to be very uncommunicative today," Henry finally said. "By the way, boys, is there any little thing I can do for you? Do you, by any chance, want to ask *me* a question?"

They glared sullenly and hatefully at him, then turned in a body and walked back to their cars. By the time they had reached the road they had regained their voices and they were muttering angrily among themselves.

Later on, the same delegation called on Sheriff Ben Hodges. They were thoroughly aroused now and they demanded that the sheriff do something about ridding the county of a known criminal who might at any moment turn out to be a menace to the peace and security of them all. Sheriff Ben was a big man and some of his weight was fat. He was well-disposed and given to indolence, being more inclined to sit in his easy chair and read books than militantly and actively to perform the duties required of his office. He had maintained his job throughout the years by giving the appearance of agreeing with everybody about everything and never taking sides in a public controversy. This time, however, he felt that he had to make a stand.

"Well, now," he said mildly, "as for that kid being a menace, I'm not so sure. You see he's a distant kin of Henry's — son of a cousin on his mother's side, I think — and Henry had him pretty thoroughly investigated before he took him in. Claude lived all his life in the city where they burn coal to make steel and the only patch of green he ever saw was in the public park where the police had signs forbidding him to walk on the grass. One hot evening, when the air was moist and full of smoke and soot, some boys his own age drove by in a car. They had girls with them and they took

Claude along for a ride in the country. It turned out that the car had been stolen and Claude was convicted of complicity in the crime." Sheriff Ben spoke as persuasively as he knew how, trying to make them understand so's not to have trouble with them. "I know," he conceded, "that Claude probably had sense enough to realize that those other boys really didn't own that automobile, but, still in all, when a kid's hungry for a breath of country air, he isn't going to be too particular how he gets it, is he?"

The delegation didn't understand and what's more, they didn't believe Sheriff Ben's version of Claude's crime. Rumor had given them an uglier and more interesting version and they preferred to believe that. They resented Sheriff Ben's attempt at cleaning up Claude's character. Claude was a criminal, they said, and, if the sheriff wanted to, he could find some sort of a pretext to run him out of the community. The implication was that, if the sheriff appreciated which side his bread was buttered on, he would do what was required of him. Sheriff Ben understood the implication. He had eaten the public's bread for many years and sometimes it had a bitter taste; it was buttered with humiliation. On this day he had no appetite for it, and he made the political mistake of openly antagonizing a group of representative citizens.

"As for being a criminal," he said, "sometimes that's a state of mind and the result of circumstances. I don't suppose that there's many of us here who, at one time or another, couldn't have been in Claude's shoes. During prohibition, for instance, some of you farmers made hard liquor and some of you merchants sold it. Most of us drank it and I, being sheriff, violated my sworn oath by overlooking it." He stared steadily and defiantly at them. "That isn't all I've overlooked," he said, "and some of you wouldn't like it if I got more specific. In any event there're darned few of us who, according to the strict letter of the law and with a little bad luck, couldn't have a prison or a jail record hanging over us."

He rose and waved a heavy hand in dismissal.

"Come to see me again, gentlemen," he said. "As you know, I am always at your services. But the next time you come to me about that kid, who's working ten hours a day for a chance at a decent way of life, I'd appreciate it kindly if you'd have more to go on than your prejudices."

The delegation clumped angrily out of the office and Sheriff Ben realized that he had seriously jeopardized a job that perhaps he didn't deserve and, with it, the money he didn't at all times earn.

After that the citizens of Green Valley sullenly accepted Claude's presence among them. They didn't

offer him any physical harm; no individual would have thought of it, excepting Orry Quinn, and he, being a coward, would not have risked the attempt. They simply ignored Claude and, excepting for Henry Rankins and Sheriff Ben, the kid didn't have a friend or a speaking acquaintance in the community until Laura Hannifer came along. Laura was the only child of one of the oldest families in Green Valley. Her parents had pampered her a great deal and, because she had a will of her own, she was considered arrogant. She had just recently returned home from a visit with relatives in another part of the state, and one day she rode her horse up to Henry Rankins' house and got off and sat on the porch with him.

"Hello, Uncle Hank," she said to Henry, who was no kin of hers, "I just dropped in for a glass of milk and to stick my nose into your business. I understand you're harboring a dangerous criminal hereabouts."

"I sure have," said Henry, grinning at her. "A regular killer-diller."

"Good for you," said Laura. "I've been hearing about him and I understand that the citizens of our community don't like him. Well, anybody these people around here don't like has a long running start toward being my pal. I don't like most of *them*, either."

Then Claude Warren, his face smudged with grease from his working on the tractor, came around the corner of the house and stood staring at Laura as if he'd never seen a girl before. Certainly he'd never seen a girl so healthy and tanned and with such golden hair and with such a friendly look in her eyes.

"Hi, Dirty-face," she said gaily to him. "Come on over and sit a spell." As he stood and goggled at her she laughed at him. "Don't be bashful," she said. "I came over here just to see you. Robbed any interesting banks lately?"

Her grin was so infectious and friendly that he grinned back at her and finally obeyed her command and sat beside her on the porch. Henry departed to get a glass of milk and, when he returned, Laura had already succeeded in thawing Claude out. He was talking to her, a little embarrassed, but with the eagerness of a kid who has long been starved for companionship.

It might have been sympathy and understanding on Laura's part at first, but it soon grew beyond that and presently everybody in Green Valley was discussing the outrageous carryings-on of Laura Hannifer with the ex-convict. The carryings-on weren't very spectacular. After attending a village dance and being frozen cold by the others, Claude and Laura contented themselves with hunting and fishing and riding horses together, and, in order to give Claude time for that, Laura helped him with his chores around Henry's place. The mere fact that Laura kept company with Claude,

however, constituted a howling scandal.

Ramsey Hannifer and his wife did their best to break up the affair. At first they pleaded with Laura, and then they threatened all sorts of punishment, but she defied them. She loved Claude, she declared, and she intended to marry him one day. Any interference from them, she told them, would only succeed in hastening the event. They knew her well enough to realize that she meant business. Finally, in the hopes that the whole thing was merely infatuation on Laura's part and that eventually she would come to her senses, they ceased to offer any open opposition to the affair. They had, however, a definite plan of action which they intended to adopt in case the thing went too far.

Other residents of Green Valley did not know of this plan and they were of the opinion that immediate and drastic action should be taken to end what they considered to be an intolerable breach of public morals. There was some talk of forming a citizens' committe to remove Claude forcibly from the community, but it is doubtful if anything would ever have been done about it if, one afternoon, Henry Rankins had not been found dead in a pool of blood on the floor of his barn. Jason Watters, the county tax assessor, who discovered the body, did not bother to investigate the cause of death. He ran from the barn and called for Claude and discovered that Claude was nowhere in sight and that, in addition to this Henry's car was missing. Jason telephoned Sheriff Ben and then proceeded along the road to town, spreading the word that Henry Rankins had been murdered and that Claude Warren had disappeared.

By the time Sheriff Ben arrived at the farm, a dozen cars were parked in front of it and the barn was filled with men who milled in a circle about the body and disturbed or destroyed whatever evidence there might have been. This had not prevented them from forming opinions, however. They had picked up and handled and passed around various instruments, one of which they were certain had been used to crush Henry's skull, and they were in disagreement only as to which was the true weapon. Even if Sheriff Ben had been an expert, which he wasn't, he could not have gained much information from conditions as he found them. He ordered the others out of the barn and then telephoned Doc Doran, the coroner, to come get the body.

By the time Sheriff Ben came out of Henry's house after making the phone call, the crowd in the yard had doubled and they were excitedly discussing a new aspect of the case. Laura Hannifer, it had been learned, had also disappeared. Her worried parents didn't know her whereabouts, but they were afraid

that she might have eloped with Claude Warren. This was all the crowd needed to know. They scattered to their cars and the search for Claude and Laura was on.

Sheriff Ben went back to his office and waited. It was not long before Lonnie Hearne, his deputy, assisted by Orry Quinn and another volunteer posseman, came in, dragging Claude and Laura with them. Claude had evidently resisted arrest and he was considerably banged up and bloody about the face. Laura, whose clothes were torn, was breathing fire and defiance and still struggling in the arms of the two possemen.

"Caught 'em with the goods," Lonnie announced proudly. "They were in Henry's car and Claude had a pocketful of money that he didn't earn as no farm hand."

While Lonnie prodded Claude with his revolver, the two kids told their story. They had discovered that Laura's parents had been secretly planning to send her to California to live with relatives, and, aided and abetted by Henry, they had decided to get married. Henry, they claimed, had lent them his car and the money for the elopement and the last they had seen of him he was in good health. They had not known, they declared, that Henry was dead until Lonnie and the others arrested them.

"And that's the truth, so help me," said Claude.

"It's a damn lie and, this time, *nobody's* going to help you," said Lonnie, viciously jamming the revolver against Claude's spine.

"Up until the present moment," said Sheriff Ben, knocking the revolver out of Lonnie's hand, "you're neither judge, jury, nor executioner for this commonwealth, Lonnie. You, Orry, let go of that girl and all of you clear out. I'll take over from now on."

After the others had made a reluctant departure, Sheriff Ben turned to Claude.

"Maybe you're telling the truth," he said. "I don't know. Anyway, I'm going to lock you up until we get a better idea of what the truth is."

Following a struggle with Laura, who insisted on being locked up too, Sheriff Ben succeeded in placing Claude in a cell. Then he sat and talked with Laura until her parents arrived and, after a great deal of difficulty, persuaded her to go home with them.

At first there were only a dozen men in front of the jail. They stood around and talked angrily but without purpose. Orry was one of them. After awhile he detached himself from the group and went into the village where he found a cluster of citizens gathered in front of the hotel discussing the case. He shoved his way into the center of the cluster and soon dominated the conversation by boastfully telling of his part in the capture and subjugation of Claude Warren, the murderer.

"How do you know he's a murderer?" someone asked. "Did he confess?"

"Well," said Orry, hesitating a moment, "not in so many words, but he *practically* did."

Then Orry went about the village and told his story to other groups of eager listeners, embellishing it as he went along. By the time he had reached the end of the main street he had dropped the word *practically* from his narrative. Claude, according to his story now, had *actually* confessed to having beaten Henry Rankins to death for his money. The news swept back up the street and presently even those who had heard Orry's first version of the story, were convinced that Claude had admitted his guilt.

"And what's more," Orry said importantly to a new group of listeners, "they're not going to let him get away with it. There's talk of breaking into the jail and stringing him up."

Soon word flashed through town and into the farming district that a crowd had gathered in front of the country jail for the purpose of lynching Claude Warren. This story in itself created the crowd which previously had not existed. Men, women and children flocked into the square facing the jail and waited expectantly for something to happen. Nothing happened. The crowd had no purpose or direction and they lacked leadership. Each individual member of the throng considered himself not a potential participant in whatever was about to take place, but merely a spectator to what the others were going to do.

An hour passed and it began to grow dark and the crowd grew more and more restless. They were in the mood of an audience that has paid out good money to see a show, the opening curtain of which has been delayed too long. If they had been in a theatre they would have stamped their feet and whistled. As it was they milled about and looked questioningly at one another and began to murmur, at first petulantly and then angrily. Finally, the shrill piping voice of a small boy rose above the murmur: "*We want Claude Warren!*" Others eagerly picked up the cry and, as they began to roar in unison, they ceased to be individuals and became a mob.

Inside his office, Sheriff Ben sat at a desk with three loaded revolvers before him. He opened a box of shells and began to load a shotgun. Lonnie, the deputy, was nervously pacing the floor.

"You're not going to be fool enough to resist them, are you, Ben?" he asked.

"Can you figure out anything else to do?" asked the sheriff.

"It's crazy," said Lonnie. "They'll tear us to pieces. I ain't going to risk my life for no lousy killer. That ain't what I'm being paid for as a deputy."

"And you're not a deputy any

more," said Sheriff Ben. He ripped the badge off Lonnie's shirt front, unlocked the door and shoved him out. "Now go howl with the rest of the jackals."

He locked the door again and went back and sat at his desk. He listened to the growing roar from outside and he began to tremble and the palms of his hands were moist. In electing Ben Hodges sheriff, the citizens of Green Valley had not bestowed on him superhuman courage. Sheriff Ben was afraid.

The mob had now achieved purpose and direction and it was not long before they obtained leaders. The people of Green Valley had long looked to certain men for leadership in politics, civic enterprises, and church affairs. It was only natural that, in this current project, they looked to the same men for guidance. And those men, out of long habit, accepted the responsibility. Orders were given and eagerly obeyed and soon a heavy timber had been produced and was aimed as a battering ram at the door of the jail.

"Sheriff Ben," yelled Dolph Hardy, one of the leaders, "we'll give you one last chance to deliver Claude Warren before we come in after him."

There was a moment of waiting and then the door opened and Sheriff Ben appeared. Orry Quinn, who was in the forefront of the mob, yelled an obscenity at him and the Sheriff made a move toward him. Orry scurried back into the crowd.

"If I lay my hands on you, Orry," said the sheriff, "I'll slap your face to pulp." Then he looked over the mob. "I am quite willing, however," he said, "to discuss matters with responsible members of this community."

"Cut out the talk," said Dolph Hardy. "We want Claude Warren."

The mob surged forward but Sheriff Ben held his ground.

"Who said you couldn't have Claude Warren?" He held out his hands placatingly. "Take it easy, boys," he urged. "I'm a reasonable man." As the men in front fell back a little and stared expectantly at him, Sheriff Ben continued to speak in a soothing voice. "The thing is," he said, "I don't want any mob tearing through my jail and ripping things apart. This is your own property and if you destroy it, you'll have to replace it out of your own pockets."

At this there was an angry, impatient murmur from the mob. The sheriff held out his hands for silence.

"I'm not saying you can't have Claude Warren," he declared. "I'll deliver him to whichever one of you wants to come in in an orderly and decent manner to get him." He looked at Dolph Hardy. "How about you, Dolph? You've been hollering your head off for him. Supposing you come in and get him?"

Dolph gave the sheriff a startled look and tried to press himself back into the mob. The others urged him on, however, and finally and reluctantly he came up the steps toward the sheriff. Sheriff Ben shoved him inside and then locked the door.

"There he is," Sheriff Ben said to Dolph, pointing to a corner of the office. "He's all yours."

Dolph turned and faced Claude Warren, who was sitting in a chair, his wrists bound by handcuffs and his face swollen and discolored from the beating administered by his captors. Claude looked up at Dolph and his eyes were alive with hopeless, helpless terror. Dolph stared into those eyes and then his mouth dropped open and he shifted his feet and seemed to be at a loss as to what to do next.

"Funny thing, Dolph," said the sheriff musingly, "but Claude looks a lot like your youngest son, Willie, doesn't he? Same size and age. Want to sock him a couple of times before you deliver him to the mob Dolph? Go right ahead. He can't hit you back, he's handcuffed."

Dolph cringed and turned his face away from the look of animal fear in Claude's eyes.

"Better yet," said Sheriff Ben, placing his hand on Dolph's arm. "Why don't you kill him right here and now, Dolph?"

Dolph stared unbelievingly at Sheriff Ben and began to back toward the door.

"Why not?" asked Sheriff Ben. "You were so all-fired blood-thirsty a while ago. You were willing to *help* kill Claude. Do you mean to say you haven't got the courage to do the job all by yourself? And, look, Dolph, if you do, someday those people out there will be awfully grateful to you. If they kill Claude collectively tonight, someday they're going to have to answer for it individually to whatever God they believe in and, if they happen to believe in hell, why, they're going to have to roast for it. If you take sole responsibility Dolph, think what a terrible load you'll lift from the conscience of your neighbors in Green Valley."

He took Dolph by the elbow and led him over to the desk where the guns were.

"Would you like to shoot him, Dolph?" he asked. "Help yourself. Which do you prefer — a shotgun or a pistol?" As Dolph stared in horror at the array of weapons, Sheriff Ben opened a drawer and picked up a blackjack. "Or maybe you'd rather take this and beat his brains out," he said.

He extended the blackjack toward Dolph and Dolph stepped back, his face beaded with perspiration and his eyes sick with dread.

"Of course," went on Sheriff Ben, "your original intention was to hang him, wasn't it?" He turned and looked about him. "Now, let's see," he said, "where can I find a really good sturdy rope?"

Dolph turned from him and rushed to the door, clawing at the lock with shaking hands. Sheriff Ben unlocked the door for him and shoved him out into the opening in the face of the tensely expectant mob.

"It seems," said Sheriff Ben in a loud voice, "that Dolph doesn't want Claude Warren any more."

Dolph looked over the mob and it seemed that suddenly he hated every individual in it.

"Go home, you fools!" he cried. "He's only a kid!"

And then his large shoulders shook with sobs and he stumbled into the mob, pushing aside or striking at anyone who stood in his way and crying out loudly for all to go home.

The stunned mob milled about uncertainly for awhile, and then the rumor started and swept through the ranks that, in an adjoining county, the real murderer of Henry Rankins had been captured and was being held in jail. The mob became a group of shamefaced individuals and the individuals hurried from the scene as if fleeing from some nameless terror. Soon the square in front of the jail was deserted.

Of course the rumor that had dissipated the mob was as unfounded as the one that had created it, but, later that night, Doc Doran, the coroner, came into the office and found Sheriff Ben sitting at his desk, now cleared of weapons.

"I just finished the autopsy on Henry," Doc announced. "He died of heart failure. He must have been pitching hay up in the loft when the stroke hit him and, in falling, he sustained those head injuries." Doc looked curiously at the sheriff, who seemed not to be listening to him. "Say, what's this I hear about a mob forming in front of this place?"

"They went home," said Sheriff Ben. "Their kids were sleepy."

Sheriff Ben sat slumped over his desk long after the coroner had left. He had, he realized, no more reason to be proud than any member of the recent mob. At first, in his abject fear of personal harm, he had wanted to hand Claude Warren over to the mob. Then he had decided that, no matter what he did, his days as sheriff of Green Valley were ended and his fear had turned into blind, unreasoning hatred and he had felt the urge to turn his guns on the mob and to kill as many of them as possible, not in the interests of justice, but to avenge himself against the others for having placed him in such a predicament. He had been spared having to make a choice between the two alternatives only because, out of his desperation, a third expedient had occurred to him.

That is why I say to you that a lyncher is neither tall nor short, nor young nor old, nor male nor female, and he is faceless, but, under certain circumstances and conditions, he is you and you and you and, yes, even me.

I am Ben Hodges.

Second of a new series

CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Apologetic Burglar

Early one morning in Milwaukee, Wis., recently, Patrolman William Klippel noticed a broken service station window. Inside, he spotted a burglar rifling the cash register. The officer waited until the man began climbing out the window, then shouted: "Stick 'em up!"

The burglar, Seth L. Greene, 31, promptly fainted.

Klippel stopped a passerby and told him to call for a patrol wagon, then tried to revive Greene. Meanwhile the excited citizen hurried to the nearest intersection and turned in a fire alarm. Then, realizing his mistake, he opened the police call box and shouted into the telephone: "A policeman needs help!"

Soon the wail of sirens could be heard in all directions. Five fire trucks, a rescue squad, a fire chief, two patrol cars and a motorcycle officer rolled up to the service station where Klippel was helping the faint-hearted Greene to his feet.

Greene apologized profusely for causing so much trouble. He admitted taking two packs of cigarettes and $12 in cash.

Sock Finish

In one of the most amazing jail-breaks in history, Fred Tredwell literally sawed through the iron bars of his cell with his socks. Tredwell was a prisoner in the Lyon County jail at Emporia, Kansas, in 1899, charged with burglary. A man of seemingly limitless patience and resource, he unravelled his homemade woolen socks, covered the yarn with soap and rolled it in particles of cement and sand scraped from the walls of his cell. Using the sand as a rasp, he pulled the strands back and forth across the top and bottom of two of his cell bars. After two months of nightly work he had cut into the bars deeply enough to break them, and squeezed through the opening to freedom. But despite his ingenuity, within a few days he was recaptured and persuaded to explain his method to puzzled jail officials.

Murder Month

More murders are committed in August than in any other month, the average being 8.5 per day. This was revealed in an examination of 461,590 arrest records throughout the nation by the FBI. The study also showed that December is the

favorite month for robberies, burglaries, larcenies and motor car thefts.

Loony Larceny

The Indiana State Highway Department has been looking for the vandal who stole a large Austrian pine in December from a row of pine trees along U. S. Highway 35, just south of Laporte. The trees had been planted about 18 years and averaged 25 feet. H. J. Schoff, district landscape supervisor for the department, can't imagine what anyone would want with a 25-foot Christmas tree.

Super Swindler

Selling the Brooklyn Bridge — a phrase synonymous with the crudest of confidence games — originated with George C. Parker, who sold the bridge thousands of times during his 45-year swindling career. Parker was sentenced to prison for life as a habitual criminal in 1928, and died in Sing Sing nine years later at the age of 76.

According to Parker's confession, he first sold the bridge a few days after its completion in 1883, and thereafter sold it on an average of twice a week. Armed with a convincing manner and fraudulent deeds and bills of sale, he selected his victims from among uneducated immigrants and gullible out-of-town visitors. Sale prices ranged from $50 to $50,000. For variety, he occasionally sold Grant's Tomb, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Madison Square Garden and the Statue of Liberty!

A Case of Character

After Meyer M. Trienkman, owner of a New York liquor store, was robbed at gunpoint of $330 several months ago, he furnished the police with a detailed description of the young bandit. He added that he thought the thief was a narcotics addict, and newspapers published his statement.

Two nights later the same robber returned. Again flashing his pistol he said indignantly: "I may be a stick-up man, but I'm sure no dope fiend!" Then he took another $120 from the till.

Famed Fingerprints

For the record, Caesar Cella, alias Charles Crispi, has the dubious distinction of being the first criminal convicted by his fingerprints. Cella was arrested on March 8, 1911 by New York police as a burglar, and latent fingerprints found at the scene of the crime were introduced in evidence. He was sentenced to the New York County Penitentiary by Judge Otto Rosalsky in General Sessions Court, New York City, on May 19, 1911.

Double Trouble

Which evidence is more convincing — the testimony of eyewitnesses or circumstantial evidence? Time and again it has been proven that witnesses can be deceived. As for

circumstantial evidence, while many law enforcement officers consider it more reliable, it is well known that chance can weave a web of conviction around innocent persons.

Only smart detective work brought truth out of the chaos of error in the Ranier-Hamilton case, in which the observations of witnesses joined circumstantial evidence in pointing the finger of suspicion at an innocent man. Famed detective Ellis H. Parker termed it his strangest case, and the late William J. Burns, dean of American detectives, said it was "one of the most remarkable cases I ever ran across during my long and busy career."

Schuyler Ranier, an aged farmer who kept his life savings in a wall safe at his home in Burlington County, N. J., lived alone with a housekeeper, Jane Nixon. One afternoon in 1909 Ranier arrived home from a trip to learn from her that he had been robbed of $27,000.

"But," she said, "the handkerchief slipped once from the thief's face. It was Will Hamilton!"

Hamilton was a neighbor, a middle-aged man of good reputation. Ranier notified authorities and Hamilton was arrested. However, the suspect insisted vehemently that he had been trimming peach trees all afternoon, with his two children playing nearby.

But more evidence came to light. A local minister had seen Hamilton running from the farmhouse with a bag in his hand. Two hunters testified they had noticed Hamilton in some bushes on the edge of the Ranier farm.

When Ellis Parker entered the case he questioned the two hunters closely, and learned that after they had apparently observed Hamilton, they had walked on across the Hamilton farm where they had seen the legs of a man on a ladder under a tree. Two children were playing nearby. Also, with innocent sincerity, the children said their father had never left the orchard. Convinced of Hamilton's innocence, Parker arranged for wide newspaper publication of a photograph of Hamilton.

As a result a letter came from Philadelphia stating that the guilty man was John Ellsworth, superintendent of the apartment house in which the letter writer lived. Parker lost no time in going to Philadelphia, where he found that Ellsworth had fled.

The fugitive was traced to a Chicago rooming house, and his arrest, confession and extradition followed. Most of the stolen money was recovered. When Ellsworth met Hamilton, both men gasped in astonishment. They had almost identical features and were of the same height, weight and age. Yet for most of their lives they had lived only 20 miles apart without ever having known each other!

Ellsworth pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years at the state prison farm.

The Double Frame

Max was tough, and he got the idea Scott Jordan had stolen his money. Which wasn't really healthy for Jordan at all.

A Scott Jordan Story

BY HAROLD Q. MASUR

I SPENT four hours with Lucille Gilian and never made a pass at her. It took a bit of doing. I had to keep a tight lid on my impulses, which must have been a novel experience for a woman with her assets. Those assets made her as solvent as the Federal Reserve Bank.

She was a tall, sleek, graceful creature, with ebony hair piled high over a pale forehead and coal black eyes rimmed inside a fringe of curled lashes. Her face was oval, her smile provocative, the movements of her body a little wicked. It was a pleasant evening. She knew how to dance and how to talk.

So long as men are motivated by glands and hormones, Lucille Gilian would never have to stand in a bread line. Not for a long time, anyway.

I didn't touch her because one, she was already married, even though she and her husband were estranged, and two, she was a prospective client.

At midnight I drove her home. It

was a tall apartment on Gracie Square. Light from a street lamp reflected in her eyes as she turned toward me. "Nightcap, Scott? One for the road?"

"Some other time," I said. "How about a rain check?"

"All right." She sounded disappointed. "But it's settled. You'll handle my case."

"We'll talk about it," I said.

She pouted. "Aren't you going to take me to the elevator?"

"Sure." I got out, went around, and opened the door for her. She linked her arm familiarly inside mine while I convoyed her into the lobby. I pushed the button. As I did so, I noticed a man standing in the shadows, but didn't give it much thought.

In a low voice, half whisper, Lucille said, "Good night, Scott."

She had moved around and was standing in front of me, very close. Her chin was tilted, her eyelids at half mast, her lips slightly parted, full and shining. It was an invitation no gentleman of breeding with red blood flowing in his veins is likely to reject. I had a little breeding and plenty of red blood and besides, I didn't want to hurt her feelings. So I reached out and gathered her in and performed on schedule.

My idea was to kiss her once, perfunctorily, and let go. Her idea was something else. She was a good technician and she took hold of me, her body up close, her mouth hungry and searching. My resolutions dissolved and I started to respond.

So the guy came out of the shadows and dropped his paw on my shoulder. His fingers dug in like the jaws of a steam shovel. A Mack truck couldn't have spun me around with more ease. His left hand stayed on my shoulder while his right hand made an enormous fist.

A meteor swam out of nowhere and exploded in my face.

There was a roaring in my ears. My brain seemed to be sloshing around as if it were loosely anchored inside my skull. Pain knifed all the way down from the side of my chin to the heels of my feet. My knees buckled and only the hand on my shoulder kept me perpendicular. I heard his voice from a distance.

"You dirty, conniving little shyster! I ought to ram the two of you down each other's throats."

Lucille was crouching back against the elevator door, her knuckles plugged into her mouth, muffling a cry.

My eyes cleared and I saw him towering over me. Max Gilian, Lucille's husband, one day out of prison on parole. A big man, Max, heavy-jawed and barrel-chested, his mouth cast in cement, unsmiling and unpleasant, bitter and grim. There was a kind of savagery in his baleful eyes. He was under a full head of steam, as if the pressure inside was too much to contain.

"Let go, Max," I said. "It's my fault. I made a pass. Lucille had nothing to do with it."

The elevator door slid soundlessly open. Lucille cowered back into it, her fingers pawing frantically at the buttons. The door closed and the cab shot upward. Max released my shoulder.

I knew what ailed him, I thought. Their estrangement had left him emotionally crippled. It's not easy being locked behind bars with memories of a woman like Lucille. A lesser man might have cracked.

But I was wrong.

"The hell with her!" he said. "It's you I'm after."

The gun was small, swallowed up in his huge fist. He produced it with a swift economy of motion. It prodded me ungently in the ribs.

"Outside," he said. "Into your car. Let's go, Jordan."

I obeyed. You don't argue with a loaded gun. He sat beside me in the Buick, teeth clenched, lips flat and white.

"Where to?" I asked.

"My place." His tone was brief and curt. He didn't feel like talking.

I said, "If they catch you with that gun, Max, you'll go back up the river to finish your sentence. Put it away. Or better still, throw it away."

"Shut up," he said. "And drive. I may have to use the gun."

I drove to the Belmore. Max had taken a suite on the fifth floor. The gun was back in his pocket when we crossed the lobby. I was thinking better now and I had a pretty good idea what was eating him. He opened the door and nudged me inside.

The light was burning and he had company. A man was seated on the sofa, smoking a long thin Havana cigar. Apparently he'd been waiting for us to get back.

Paul Hadley, attorney and counselor-at-law. An expert at probing contractual loopholes and interlocking corporations, with a good brain that knew how to get down to essentials. A slender man, dapper and impeccable, with a high scholarly forehead, intelligent eyes, a precise mouth, and the confident air of a man who knew what he wanted out of life and had the ability to get it.

I knew Hadley professionally. He was Max's lawyer. He had handled all of Max's problems, except when they nailed Max two years ago as one of the big wheels behind the bookmaking parlors. Then Hadley had called me in. He'd never had much experience in the criminal courts and he figured I'd be able to do more for Max than he could.

I tried. Every man is entitled to his day in court. I fought hard enough. I used every legal stratagem provided by the law and some that weren't, to no avail. Max was guilty and they had the evidence to prove it and the jury shipped him over.

That was that.

Now he was out on parole.

"I found him," Max said. "You were right."

Hadley looked at me and shook his head.

Max reached out suddenly and grabbed hold of my lapels. He

twisted them into a knot and lifted me six inches off the floor. I weigh a hundred and eighty pounds, and I'm six feet tall, yet my toes were actually dangling in the air.

Max's growl became words. The words grated harshly. "Where are they, Jordan? Where did you hide them?"

"Cut it out, Max. What are you talking about?"

He loosened his grip and I landed heavily on the floor. The slip of paper he took out of his pocket was a telephone message from the hotel on a standard form. He read aloud:

"*The box was empty. Jordan.*"

His eyes burned at me. "I had two hundred grand in that box. Negotiable securities, bonds and stocks. What the hell do you mean, empty."

I said, "Take it easy, Max. Slow down before you split a seam. And listen to me before you go off half-cocked. I tried to reach you on the phone, but you were out. That's why I left the message."

"It's a lie —"

"No, it isn't, Max. Let me state it simply. You're out on parole. You're not allowed to leave the state. You have a safe deposit box in Newark. You gave me a power of attorney to open the box and bring you the contents. You did that because Hadley here was tied up and couldn't get away. And also because you trusted me. I'm a lawyer, Max. I wouldn't violate that trust, not if —"

"So all lawyers are honest," he said, bitterly.

"I never said that. This lawyer is, though. Your box was empty when I opened it, Max. Cleaned out. But not by me. Hell, if I had pulled a caper like that, I wouldn't be here telling you about it. I'd be in Mexico somewhere, probably in Acapulco, soaking up the sun. Look at me, Max. Do I look like a pinhead? Do you honestly think I went south with your securities?"

His eyes kept burning at me through horizontal slits. He was considering possibilities. If he ever concluded with certainty that I had actually double-crossed him, payments on my insurance policy were going to fall due at once.

He was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head violently. "Two hundred grand. Down the drain." He wheeled suddenly and faced Hadley. "What do you make of it, Paul?"

Hadley was frowning. He lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "Beats me. Never heard of such a thing, Max. Can't imagine how anybody could empty out your box."

"How about Jordan here?"

"Oh, come now, Max. You've got to believe his story. Whatever he might or might not do, this is one stunt he wouldn't dare to pull."

Max Gilian swung around. His neck inched out of his collar. A slow surge of blood congested the veins in his face. His voice was deliberate.

"What were you doing with Lucille tonight? What cooks between you two?"

"Absolutely nothing, Max. Believe me. I met Lucille for the first time while I was defending you. She came to court every day during your trial and sat in the front row. After you were convicted and sent up, I didn't see her again until this evening. She called my office today. I found the message when I came back from Newark late this afternoon. She said she wanted to see me. I thought it might be something about your safe deposit box. I went to her apartment. It was late and I took her to dinner."

"What did she want?"

"A divorce, Max. She said she was no longer satisfied with a separation. She asked me to handle the case."

His eyes were dark, the pupils contracted. "You work pretty fast, don't you, counselor?"

"You mean because you saw me kissing her? It doesn't mean a thing. A man kisses a woman good-night, what the hell, Max, there's nothing to it."

The tight line of his mouth loosened. His shoulders sagged. He looked parched and empty.

"Yeah," he said, his tone suddenly listless. "I know. I was watching." He started to pace slowly around the room. Then he stood looking out the window for a long moment. Hadley met my eyes and gestured helplessly. After a while Max Gilian turned and came over to me.

"They tell me you know how to find things out, Jordan. Any truth in it?"

"Some."

"Find out who took that dough. Come to me and tell me about it. I'll get it back and I'll cut you in."

"Twenty-five percent, Max."

"Agreed."

"You heard him, Hadley."

"I did," he said.

"Good enough. Bankers are a close-mouthed bunch of individuals, Max. I'll need an authorization giving me the right to investigate."

He pointed at the desk. "Write it out."

I sat down and found a piece of hotel stationery. Five minutes later I handed him the pen. His fingers shook a little when he signed. He was trembling from impotence and frustration.

"Take it easy, Max," I said. "Don't burn yourself out."

He demonstrated his vocabulary. He knew most of the words and he spoke them with feeling. He was still going strong when I walked through the door.

Banks are closed at night. There was nothing I could do until morning. I went home and got some sleep.

Max Gilian operated outside the law. At any time he might be the subject of an investigation. I suppose that was one of the reasons he had studded his safe deposit boxes in neighboring cities, easily accessible to Manhattan. I knew that he

had several in Connecticut and one in White Plains. The Newark box was in the heart of the business district.

I stood outside the Merchant's Trust, a squat box of granite, solid and functional, large and impersonal, with bronze doors and an armed guard and tellers behind cages. Inside everything was neat and antiseptic. A great business, banking. You let them hold your money at two and one half percent and they lend it out for six. How can they lose?

The armed guard referred me to a man seated at a desk behind the rail. His name, according to the placard, was Ambrose George. Calm and sober and unhurried, the executive type, with one eyebrow perpetually higher than the other.

He listened to my recital and now both eyebrows were high. First he looked incredulous, then he looked patronizing. "Well, now," he said, "look here. All this is quite impossible. Nobody can get at a safe deposit vault but the legal boxholder. It simply can't be done."

"Sure," I said. "Theoretically. Let's check the records."

He reached for the interphone, touched a buzzer, and held a brief conference with the mouthpiece. Then he sat back to wait. He looked at me for a while and then he shifted his focus to the ceiling and drummed his fingers on the desk. He was hoping he could prove his point and I was hoping I could prove mine.

We didn't have long to wait. A tall thin junior executive appeared with a slip of paper and a card. Mr. Ambrose George held one above the other, studied them, compared them, and a slow smile of satisfaction moved his lips.

"Here it is, counselor. Max Gilian visited the bank six months ago and spent ten minutes in a private room with his box. He signed in on this slip of paper. You can compare his signature with the original card he signed when he leased the box."

He laid them in front of me, side by side. I am not an examiner of questioned documents, which is the technical name for a handwriting expert. But those two signatures were close enough to fool anybody without a microscope.

"It looks genuine," I said.

"Exactly." He was very smug.

"Except for one thing."

He looked at me sharply. "What's that?"

"Max Gilian was in Sing Sing prison six months ago."

Mr. Ambrose George stopped looking smug. The smile dissolved from his mouth and his jaw went perpendicular. He was not at all happy. His chair had suddenly become very uncomfortable and he squirmed around, shifting his center of gravity. His Adam's apple made a slow and painful round trip. This was precisely the sort of thing that banks constantly dreaded.

He regarded me warily. "You can prove this?" he asked anxiously.

"Absolutely."

He threw his hands up. "I can't understand it. I'd swear those two signatures are identical. I — I'm afraid I don't know what to say."

"How about the attendant who was in charge of the vault at the time?"

He referred to the slip of paper. "Kevin Graham."

"Can I speak to him?"

"Mr. Graham is no longer employed by the bank."

I raised one eyebrow. "Fired?"

Ambrose George had suddenly become very much interested in my necktie. "Graham resigned about four months ago." He was deliberately avoiding my gaze.

"Can you tell me where he lives?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Well, now . . ."

"It may help us to avoid unpleasant publicity."

He reached for the phone again and spoke into the mouthpiece. He cradled the instrument and picked up a pencil and wrote out an address for me. I stood up and straightened my hat.

"I imagine this thing can be worked out somehow," I said.

His nod was vague and committed the bank to nothing. He was staring thoughtfully into space when I left his bottom lip bulging behind his tongue.

Kevin Graham's address could have been one block away for all I knew. I'm a stranger in Newark, so I took a cab. It was a disconcerting experience. They had bumped the rates and needled the clocks. I watched the meter tick my nickels away until the cab stopped on the outskirts of town.

It was a small frame house, well tended, recently painted, with a neat garden. I moved up the walk and I saw the black crepe hanging from the door and I had a premonition. The shades were drawn, but I could hear the quiet rumble of voices. I removed my hat and knocked.

The door opened and a blade-thin man with a long somber face looked out at me. He smiled tentatively. "How do you do," he said. "Come in."

I followed him through a foyer into the living room. A coffin sat upon a wheeled stand in the center of the room. The lid was drawn back. I saw the dead face of a man in his fifties, with shrunken temples and mortician's rouge on the flat cheeks. The face meant nothing to me. I had never seen the man before.

About ten people, mostly men, were deployed around the body on folding chairs. There was silence while they stared at me incuriously for a moment, and then they continued to converse in low tones.

I was attending a wake.

The man beside me pulled out a plug of tobacco, bit off a chunk, started to put it away, reconsidered, and offered me some. I shook my head. He regarded me along the side of his nose curiously.

"You from the bank?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Friend of Kevin's?"

I nodded sadly.

"Tough," he said. "I hope they catch the hit-and-run driver that nailed him." He shook his head. "Poor Kevin. He was carrying a bit of a load and he never seen them headlights. *Plunk!* Clouted him into the right field bleachers."

He pulled a flat pint of Irish from his pocket, coupled it to his main intake, and irrigated his throat. He shoved the bottle at me. "Shot of whiskey, mister?"

I accepted the offer. Drinking with a man is the best way to gain his confidence. One small swallow was enough. It must have been distilled from old dynamite and I felt like an amateur sword swallower. The mumble of voices continued around us. Smoke hung like a disembodied cloud over the corpse. The room was nicely furnished. A thirty inch television set stood in one corner and the floor was soft with broadloom.

"Where did the accident happen?" I asked.

My informant wiped his lips, recapped the bottle, and tucked it away. "Right outside. Not ten feet from his own front yard." He heaved a melancholy sigh. "Hell of a way for a fightin' Irishman to go. And so soon after he came into a bit of money."

"Money?"

"From his Aunt Emily, saints preserve her, who passed away in the old country."

I looked properly respectful. "When was that?"

"'Bout five — six months ago."

"How's the family taking it?"

No answer. He hesitated. He peered at me sharply, suddenly remote, suspicion incubating in his eyes. "You ask a lot of questions, friend. You a cop?"

"Me?" I put my back up as if I'd been insulted. I pointed to my feet. "Do I look like a cop?" A double wrinkle of doubt appeared over his nose. I said, "It's just that I didn't know Kevin very well. I met him in the tavern a couple of times and we knocked off a few together."

That reminded him and he got out his bottle and took a long pull. I had one too. What my stomach needed was a special lining installed by the Bethlehem Steel Company. My informant produced a handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

"Ah," he murmured, "poor Kevin. No family at all. Nobody but his friends to mourn for him."

I nodded sympathetically. After a moment I stood up and paid my last respects. Then I departed.

Fifteen minutes passed before I could flush a cab out there in the suburbs. The cab took me to the railroad station and I ran for a train. Rattling along under the Hudson River I thought: Like hell it was an accident. Somebody pointed an automobile straight at Kevin Graham and gunned the engine.

This was a driver who really had a motive to run.

I concentrated. I took the known facts and weighed them against probabilities. I sifted and speculated and added an inference or two, and the case began to shape up. If only I could fill in one or two little pieces.

The scheme was a beaut, conjured with imagination and daringly executed.

The train took me to Manhattan. I got out of Penn Station at 33rd Street and went straight to Gracie Square. There was a doorman on duty this time. He performed and I went through. The elevator took me up to Lucille Gilian's apartment and I rang the bell. I rang it long and hard.

She wasn't home.

I extracted two ten dollar bills from my wallet on the way down. I tapped on the pane of glass and beckoned to the doorman and he joined me in the lobby. I fanned out the bills and hung them under his nose. He maintained a calm front, but his eyes were greedy.

"A bonus," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Easily earned."

"Yes, sir."

"Will you answer a few questions?"

He was willing. Money is the best tongue loosener I know. I pumped him about Lucille Gilian and he came up with answers. She was a mighty fine lady. Didn't skate around with a lot of men at all. Concentrated mostly on one boy friend, a fine-looking gentleman. The doorman had used his eyes and he gave me a good description.

It fitted. Perfectly.

I tucked the double sawbuck into his breast pocket and walked out. There was a drug store on the corner. I went in and patronized the telephone booth. The switchboard operator at Max Gilian's hotel put me through.

"How do you feel, Max?" I asked.

"Lousy. Did you find my two hundred grand?"

"Not exactly, but we may be able to salvage a big piece of it. Can you meet me?"

"Where?"

"At Hadley's office."

"What for?"

"He's your lawyer, isn't he, Max? What did you do with that gun?"

"Why?"

"Get rid of it. You're on parole, remember?"

He made a suggestion, which I ignored, and told me he was leaving at once.

Hadley's practice required a lot of front. His office was furnished expensively and with taste. The most decorative item, however, had not been manufactured in Grand Rapids. She sat behind a desk in the reception room, a voltage redhead built like the proverbial structure behind the farmhouse, tall, generously equipped, with sultry eyes in a petulant face. Quite a girl.

Yes, Mr. Hadley was in. She announced Max Gilian's name and got us the green light. He was standing behind his desk when we trooped in, competent, debonaire, smiling.

He got us seated and produced smokes. Then he settled back in his foam-cushioned,leather-upholstered, posture-fitting chair and put his precise eyes straight at me.

"Well, Jordan," he said, "I assume you have a report to make."

"I sure have."

He glanced approvingly at Gilian. "What did I tell you, Max. No grass growing under Jordan's feet. I knew he'd get results. All right, counselor, let's have it."

Max was leaning forward, his heavy jaw tight, his eyes intent.

I said, "Okay," and took a deep breath and crossed my fingers."Here's what happened. Somebody forged Max's name at the Newark bank and got into his safe deposit box. The forgery was perfect, traced from a genuine copy of Max's signature directly onto one of the bank's official requisition slips."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Max growled.

Hadley was frowning. "I don't understand. Those forms are signed in the presence of the attendant. How could anybody get away with it?"

"Collusion," I said. "The attendant was reached. Somebody worked on him, showed him how it could be done, promised him a cut of the take, probably paid him in advance. The attendant was tractable. Here was a chance to make more money in one lump sum than he could ever hope to save in a lifetime. He decided to take a chance and he went along with the scheme."

Gilian's fists were huge and tight on his knees. He mangled the cigar between clenched teeth. His voice was harsh. "Who is this attendant? What's his name? Where can I reach him?"

"It's too late," I said. "He's dead."

Max opened his eyes.

"He got it last night," I said. "Hit-and-run driver. They think it was an accident. I know better. He was killed. Someone who knew his habits was parked outside his house, waiting for him to come home. And he was nailed when he stumbled half drunk across the street. Murder in the first degree. Premeditated and deliberate."

Max cleared his throat noisily. "But why?"

"Because he was a threat. He was potentially dangerous, the only witness that could identify the man who cleaned out your box. You were out on parole, Max. You had learned the box was empty. You were about to investigate. You had started the ball rolling. The heat was on. Kevin Graham was weak. That's why he fell for their scheme in the first place. He was the kind of man who melted under pressure. They knew that. They couldn't afford to wait. He had to be eliminated without delay. And so it was done last night. He was killed in front of his new house, the

house he bought with your money, Max."

"Then you know who did it," Hadley said.

"Sure," I said.

Hadley moistened his lips. "Who?"

I pointed my finger at him. "You."

Max didn't say a word. His eyes were frozen, divided between us.

Hadley exhumed a thin, stilted smile. "What are you trying to say, Jordan?"

"I'm not *trying* to say anything. I'm saying it. It was you, Hadley. You cooked up the whole scheme, engineered it and executed it."

He shot a quick glance at Max, who sat, muscles tensed, like a leopard coiled up to spring. Hadley laughed once, without humor. "A very fanciful conclusion, Jordan."

"Is it?" I said. "You gave yourself away last night when Max brought me up to his room. 'I found him,' Max said. 'You were right.' Right about what, Hadley? That I was out with Lucille? Sure. You told Max where to wait. But how did you know?"

Bull's-eye! A muscle twitched in his jaw and his eyes narrowed.

"Because you wrote the script and produced the show. You told Lucille to call me. You told her to invite me into the lobby. You wanted Max to think I had double-crossed him, that I'd stolen his securities and was waltzing around with his wife. You knew Max had a gun. You knew he had a temper. Anything might happen. If I'd caught a bullet, it would have been perfect. Max would get the chair and all your problems would be over. If not, what the hell, there were other ways."

Hadley appealed to Max. "The man is out of his mind."

Nothing came out of Max. Not a sound. His face was carved in wood. His eyes were a pair of knives aimed at the lawyer.

Hadley's smile went lopsided. "How about the key?" he said. "Nobody can get into a safe deposit box without a special key."

"I was waiting for you to ask that," I said. "How about it, Max? Did you ever give Hadley a power of attorney to open that box?"

Nothing moved in Max's face. I didn't like it. I didn't like all that pressure building up inside of him. But I couldn't stop now.

"Because if you did," I said, "then you must have given him a key too, and he could easily have had a duplicate made. And if you didn't, then he probably got Lucille to sneak the key away and do it for him."

Max dredged up one word. "Lucille?"

"Sure," I said. "They've been seeing a lot of each other. I can prove it. He visits her all the time. The doorman can identify him. I wouldn't be surprised if they put the finger on you two years ago, just to get you out of the way."

White lumps were contracted on each side of Max's jaw. But still he didn't move. A runaway muscle kept twitching at his lips.

I said to Hadley, "You specialize in corporations and contracts. What the hell do you know about criminal law? You think they can't locate a witness who saw your car in Newark? You think a microscope won't show evidence of a collision on your bumper?"

Circumstantial evidence. Every bit of it. Nothing solid. But it was enough for Max. Suddenly, he was out of his chair in a savage lunge across Hadley's desk. Hadley had been expecting it and he was almost ready, but not quite. His hand flashed out of his desk, holding a gun. He had time enough to pull the trigger, but not enough to take aim. The report was sharp and flat and then Max was on top of him. One mighty swipe knocked Hadley sideways out of his chair. The gun flew out of his hand and clattered to the floor.

For all his bulk Max had the agility of an animal. He kept on going right over the top of the desk, his hands reaching for Hadley's throat. I stood up and walked around for a look.

Max's powerful fingers had cut the flow of oxygen at Hadley's windpipe. Dark blood congested the lawyer's face. Gurgling sounds filtered through clenched teeth.

"All right, Max," I said. "That's enough. Let the law take care of him."

Max was deaf. He didn't even hear me.

I saw Hadley's face change color, a cyanotic blue taking over.

"Max," I said sharply. "Cut it out. You want to wind up in the Ossining broiler?"

He went right on squeezing the life out of Hadley.

"Max," I said desperately.

Nothing could stop him. I reached out and yanked down one of Hadley's beautiful green drapes and wrapped it around his onyx desk set. I picked out a spot just behind Max's ear and swung. He didn't even grunt. He just relaxed his grip and rolled over.

Both men were out.

I used Hadley's telephone. I made one call to the New York police and one to the Newark police.

There was blood on Max's left side where Hadley's bullet had scooped a groove along his ribs. I patted Max's pockets and found his gun. I took it and hid it behind one of the filing cabinets. It would save him from being slapped with a parole violation.

Max might be sore about my clouting him over the head. But he'd get over it.

And he'd get over Lucille too.

The Caller

It was horrible. The voice kept spouting filth, telling her things about herself that no one else could possibly know . . .

BY
EMMANUEL WINTERS

THE telephone rang and Miss Turner awoke with a start. From the next room she could hear the outraged whimpering of her mother, a chronic invalid and a light sleeper. It was precisely 2:30 A.M.

The bell didn't stop ringing and Miss Turner got herself focussed. She snatched up her frayed chambray robe, flipped on the hallway switch enroute, and hurried, splayfooted, down the stairs. Her hand shook on the receiver.

"Is this Phoebe?" It was a man's voice, low and peculiar.

"Why, yes. Yes. What is it?"

There was a slight pause, then, in an amused manner, the voice declared: "You're a piece of what goes floating down the river." The voice didn't leave anything to doubt. It gave the four-letter synonym.

Miss Turner stiffened. "What? What did you say?"

"I said you're a piece of — nothing.

How can you call yourself a human being? Why don't you go drown yourself in a sewer?" The voice became sly, horrible. "How about it? Would you like me to come over and visit with you a while? You know. Real cozy?"

Miss Turner was slight, around forty, with pinched cheeks, and eyes chronically tired from working all her life in an insurance office. Completely shoaled by duties and unalluring, someone to feel sorry for. Certainly not anyone who'd receive this type of call.

Now she was fully awake and began to shriek, but she thought in time to lower her voice and avoid alarming her mother. "Who are you? What *is* this? Are you crazy or something?"

"Me?" the voice purred.

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, *I'm* not crazy or something." The voice was illiterate, untrained, with a bit of a cigarette rasp around the edges, but well handled. Absolutely controlled, purposeful.

Miss Turner trembled, but suddenly felt tremendous relief as a new thought came to her. She could almost laugh. "You obviously have the wrong number."

"Wrong number?" The voice went on purring. "This is Bedford 3–5573, isn't it?"

A film came over Miss Turner's eyes. She couldn't speak.

"Well, is it or is it not?"

"It is."

"And you're this gorgeous little babe named Phoebe, ain't you?"

Panic peered in at all the windows and its sneer rustled the string-drapes between the parlor and dining room. Miss Turner went hot and cold with perspiration, and could barely hold the receiver.

"What do you want with me?"

The snicker came over unmistakably. "Who, me? Why, nothing. Nothing at all. Except what would *anybody* want from the sexiest broad we got in town?"

Miss Turner prepared to slam down the receiver. "Why, you lunatic. How dare you? I'm going to hang up and if you ever have the audacity to call this number again, I'll call the police."

"Well, well, how cozy," the voice said. "You going to let them in on it too? And the fire department? And the U.S. Marines?"

Miss Turner flushed and brought the receiver down, but not before the last raucous statement had come through to her ears. "You're going to hear from me often. Day and night. Mostly nights."

On the way up, Miss Turner felt dizzy. She decided she'd better not tell her mother. Her mother had a bad heart. "Some nut with a wrong number," she called out in answer to the querulous inquiry from the other room. But at breakfast it almost came out. They were having orange juice and oatmeal in the alcove off the hallway when the phone rang. It was 7:30. Miss

Turner jumped, then tried to take hold of herself. She went to the phone casually but at once gripped the receiver so hard her knuckles showed white. It was the voice again.

"Look you, whoever you are," she whispered fiercely. "My mother is a very sick woman and can't stand very much more of this sort of thing, I can tell you. If you don't hang up this minute and stop bothering us I'll go to the police." Her voice became a bit hysterical. "Hang up," she said.

"What a shame," the man said. "Sick? Your mother?"

"Yes. Extremely."

There was a pause, then a chuckle, deep in the throat and outrageous. "Then you and me'll have to be real careful we don't disturb her when I come calling. We'll just use the downstairs couch." The voice went down to a sexy whisper. "Ready for me yet, sweetheart — huh?"

Miss Turner slipped the receiver down without a sound and immediately raised her voice. "I'm sorry, madam. You've got the wrong number. This is Bedford 3-5573, *not* four. Please do be careful in the future." She forced a smile and went back to the alcove and her mother.

Her mother was a wasted away woman with slipshod white hair and a deep pallor, chronically weary. She had been a vivacious woman at one time, with a good sense of humor — totally opposite from the traditional possessive mother. But after a lifetime of sickness, early widowhood, and total dependence on her daughter, her kindly humor had turned into a kind of bitterness. Complaint often crept into her voice. "Another wrong number, Marie? Who is it, a secret boy friend?" Her voice changed. "Couldn't sleep a wink after the phone ringing last night."

The teacup was shaking in Miss Turner's hand. "If this goes on I just don't know what we're going to do, mama."

However much you want to keep a thing like this secret from someone who shares your home, Miss Turner saw clearly, it soon becomes impossible. If the calls were going to persist her mother would finally have to know, and Miss Turner was afraid of what it would do to her heart.

That night exactly at midnight the third call came and Miss Turner again had to rush down from bed. This time she hung up right away. When he called back immediately she left the receiver off the hook. But half an hour later — just time enough for her to have crept back into bed and gotten to sleep — the phone company sent its attention-getter alarm through, and kept blasting insistently until her mother cried out, "For heaven's sake, Marie. Answer the phone." When the voice called shortly after, he threatened to ring all night, if necessary, and Miss Turner had to talk to him for at least five minutes. The abuse was worse with more outrageous invitations and four-letter descriptions.

"For God's sake," Miss Turner said, almost in tears. "What do you have against me? Who are you? Why are you doing this to us? Wont you *please* stop calling?"

The man laughed again, the strange, suggestive laugh. "Call you in the morning, baby. Early. Maybe I'll catch you with your pants off."

The first thing that morning Miss Turner decided. She'd better tell her mother. These calls were going to continue. And at breakfast she did. "In case *you* were to answer the telephone sometime, mama."

To Miss Turner's surprise, Mrs. Turner was neither amazed nor upset, just rather amused. And, staring, Miss Turner said: "Thank God, at least, mama, for that."

Her mother said that, why, yes she'd heard of such cases, cranks getting hold of someone's telephone number and making a nuisance of themselves for spite, an imagined grievance, or something. Had her daughter insulted or slighted someone down at the office?

"Why, no," Miss Turner said. That's what she'd been wracking her brains over. She didn't have an enemy in the world.

"Well," her mother suggested, "there's only one thing to do. Take the matter up with the telephone company immediately. Have them trace the call."

"Yes," Miss Turner said. That's what she'd been thinking herself.

The following Wednesday, her afternoon off, she went downtown to the local company offices and was referred at once to the supervisor, a Mrs. Armstrong. Mrs. Armstrong was a courteous, smart looking woman who heard her out alertly and showed sincere dismay but said that unfortunately not much could be done. There were too many similar cases and they couldn't track down local calls unless of the utmost emergency. The only thing she could suggest would be to install a new, unlisted number. But Miss Turner made a sad sound. "Oh, I do outside stenographic work, Mrs. Armstrong. I'm listed in all the agencies. People wouldn't know where to call." Mrs. Armstrong was sympathetic. In that case, Miss Turner would simply have to bear it out until the caller, undoubtedly one of those psychopathic cases, got tired, or picked up the trail of someone else. If it got too troublesome — disturbing a sick mother certainly was a bad thing — Miss Turner might take the matter up with the police. Perhaps they could work something out. It certainly would be worth trying.

"Well, maybe he'll stop himself." Miss Turner managed to smile. "If only we could get a clue as to who he is." When she walked down the long corridor on her way out she saw Mrs. Armstrong making a moue of puzzlement. It was obvious to Miss Turner that Mrs. Armstrong was wondering who would call on such a precious anonymous little thing like her. Telephone cranks and poison pen writers usually knew what their

victims looked like, wanted somebody glamorous.

That, apparently, was the question puzzling not only Mrs. Armstrong. That evening as Miss Turner and her mother sat together reading magazines in the little parlor still furnished with antimacassars and rockers from Mrs. Turner's youth — both really quite openly waiting for the telephone to ring — Miss Turner saw that her mother was wondering about it, too. Miss Turner knew exactly what was going on in her mother's head, had for years. In her own heyday, Mrs. Turner had been a pretty, gay young woman with a great many male admirers. And she'd never stopped thinking her daughter shou'd have inherited some of it. Miss Turner watched the older woman peer over the top of the magazine with a strange sour antagonism. Maybe, Miss Turner was beginning to realize, her mother had a point. Those droopy old dresses! She hadn't had a new hat in three years! Even to herself she had to admit that she was hopeless, an old maid. The past 20 years all she'd done for excitement was go to church suppers, take in a movie once a week, and, for her annual two-week vacation, visit with her mother at a quiet lake hotel nearby, rocking on the porch with the old ladies.

But Mrs. Armstrong's and Mrs. Turner's puzzlement didn't alter the fact. Some man *was* calling Miss Turner.

That midnight he called again, and all the rest of the week, and they didn't have the courage to call the police. For both of them it would be a terrible strain. He now let loose with such a new low in sexuality, when Mrs. Turner heard what he'd said (she insisted her daughter tell it all, word for word) she had palpitations and couldn't sleep and Miss Turner herself on two occasions was violently sick to her stomach.

"Well, what are we going to do?" her mother asked at breakfast the end of that week. The night had been horrible.

Miss Turner clasped her hands. She was the picture of helplessness and total disorganization. She looked terrible. "I don't know. I've done everything. I've appealed to his better nature, threatened to call the police, told him how ill you were. Nothing works. Frankly, mother, I'm at my rope's end. I suppose now we'll simply have to go to the police and get it over with."

Mrs. Turner was painfully upset. "Oh, the police," she said. "And the publicity." She looked as though she were going to have an attack, and Miss Turner agreed with her attitude. Like her mother, she herself, she said, could take a few more days of it — all that abuse and the broken nights — if in the end it meant he'd get tired and stop by himself. "But I warn you, mama," she said, shaking her head wearily, "if one more week doesn't do it, then it's straight to the police. I don't think I can stand more."

"Well, maybe the man *will* stop." Her mother smiled with queer hopefulness.

The man didn't stop. All the rest of the week everything was the same — horrible calls at all hours. There was only one change, Miss Turner reported.

Miss Turner told her mother it was something brand-new and was frightening her to death. It was no longer a matter of mere annoyance, nuisance, curiosity, or lost sleep. This was nightmare. The man had begun telling her things out of her past.

"Things out of your past?"

"Yes."

"Such as what?"

Miss Turner got a funny look. "Well, such as: 'What about Lemuel G.' " Lemuel Greer had been one of Miss Turner's classmates, and had been considered the handsomest boy in school, star of the football and basketball teams, head of the dramatic club, a dream of a dancer; all the girls had been wild about him. He'd been elected class "dreamboat."

"Why, what about Lemuel Greer?" her mother demanded.

Miss Turner got flustered and didn't want to talk about it but finally had to confess. At the class picnic, she and Lemuel had gone for a stroll in the wood, found a deserted bandstand, and sat talking for hours.

"He went with *you?*" her mother said.

"Yes, mama. Oh, all perfectly innocent, of course." Lemuel had merely kissed her once, that was all. It was one of her fondest memories. She'd kept it secret even from her mother.

Mrs. Turner said, "Why, Lemuel Greer married Susan Ann Blower not three months out of high school." They were schoolmate sweethearts.

Miss Turner nodded. "Yes." What frightened her was that nobody in the world but she and Lemuel — who, for the past 20 years, had been an oil executive in Arabia — knew anything about the bandstand business. "How did the lunatic on the telephone know?"

Also, how did he know to mention the time, just two or three months ago, some horrible man, sitting next to her in the balcony of the movie house, had let his arm slip from the back of her chair to around her waist and begged her to see the picture over again with him — until she'd threatened to call the management?

"What?" her mother said hoarsely.

There were five or six other little matters the man had brought up out of the depths of her past. "Oh, God, mama," Miss Turner begged, "I'm going crazy. How can he possibly know?"

Her mother stared for a long moment. "Well, all right," she said finally, resolutely. "It's gone far enough. I don't believe I can stand another night's broken sleep, anyway. We've tried to dissuade him two whole weeks and it hasn't worked. Now we'll *go* to the police."

That evening, on her way home from work, Miss Turner dropped in at headquarters and asked to see the chief. Chief Harrington was a tall skinny cigar-chewer with a bald head, a chronic worried look, and a kindly soft voice which he tried to make charming. He told her to sit down and listened carefully to her story.

The chief got an amused little twinkle in his eyes; it was perfectly normal — he couldn't hide it. "Phoning *you*, Miss Turner?"

"Yes."

"Saying those things right out?"

"Yes. Seems to get an awful sadistic pleasure out of it."

The chief got down to business. He shook his head. "I don't know what makes them tick. Nuts. We get them in spells, like clockwork." He said there was only one way to go about it. If she could manage to wangle a date out of him and have him call for her at a certain spot, lonely or otherwise, his men could be waiting in plainclothes to pick up the nut. He leaned forward. "Do you think you could arrange it?"

"Well, he's been asking for a date every time he's called," Miss Turner said.

"Think he really means it?"

"Of course he really means it." Miss Turner appeared a trifle piqued.

The chief sat back. "Well, fine." He put his palms together and thought a moment. "When he calls tonight make believe you're falling for his stuff. Act a little flirtatious. When he asks for a date, tell him you've been thinking it over and maybe he's not as bad as he sounds. You'll meet him, let's see, tomorrow night or any other night — let him set the night — and make it somewhere innocent where it won't arouse his suspicion: Say at the last table in the Main Street Cafeteria. Our boys will be sitting around." The chief was efficient and considerate; it was a fetish with him. "Don't worry, Miss Turner. Our boys will see that nothing happens to *you*." He grinned with conscious charm. "It'll be as safe as a jaunt to Sunday School."

Miss Turner got up and put on her gloves. She was sparkling. "Worry, Chief Harrington? Why, I've never felt better. This is an adventure." She was flushing with pleasure, actually flirtatious. "What makes you think I go to Sunday School?"

The chief escorted her past the sergeant's desk and when she went on alone she could distinctly hear behind her in the hollow city-hall corridor the murmur of their voices, climaxed by the sergeant's surprised: "Her, chief?" It was genuine. Miss Turner was quite flattered. The tone was one of respect, even admiration.

The next few nights, Miss Turner put on, she thought, the act of her life. During her conversations with the man, her indignation transitioned subtly to charm and girlishness, and the man's sly suggestive sexualities were answered more and more in

measure. "Well, well," the man said. "So I busted you down." His voice was almost affectionate. "You won't be sorry, baby. What night would you like to be lucky?"

Miss Turner thought the following evening would be a good time but the man said No, he wanted to rest up a few nights to be sure this would be the date of her life, something sometime she'd want to write a book about. "How about next Saturday night?"

"Where?" Miss Turner asked.

"How about in front of the bus station?"

"No," Miss Turner said. That wouldn't suit her. Too conspicuous. Somebody might spot her — one of her many boy friends.

"Well, where then?"

"How about inside the Main Street Cafeteria — my usual place, the last table from the entrance?" She'd be wearing a new pink hat with a veil — and a pink carnation over her heart.

"Heart?" He said the other word, a shorter one, and then gave her the wind-off laugh. Miss Turner, hanging up, clapped her hands. Everything had gone off just as the police chief had wished.

The following day she called on him at headquarters and told what had happened, and the chief wanted to know had the man seemed suspicious and Miss Turner said the man certainly hadn't *acted* suspicious. Within the next few days came corroboration. The phone calls abruptly ceased. Apparently no need to call any more, mission accomplished. Chief Harrington pointed out, however, that it might also indicate the man had got wind of something and had decided to ditch the whole thing. But in that event, nothing lost. Miss Turner would be free of the nuisance which was, after all, the main idea.

"Most certainly is," Miss Turner agreed heartily. Miss Turner didn't know why; every time she spoke with the chief she felt like a woman of the world, calm and sophisticated. It was like coming out of her cocoon.

The chief made all the arrangements. Miss Turner would merely have to show up in the cafeteria at the proper time Saturday night. He would assign four detectives to the four adjacent tables and, to make doubly sure, he'd station men at both the front and rear exits.

The only question was, would the man show up?

"If he does," the chief instructed her, "the crackpot will probably not make himself known until he's convinced himself from a distance, probably through the front window or at another table as an innocent diner, that everything is okay. That means he'll probably be later than you've arranged. If and when he does finally get up enough courage to come over to your table, you just greet him cordially, let him sit down — and that's all we'll need. We'll close in fast. It'll be over in a minute."

"What'll I do then?" Miss Turner inquired, timidly. Miss Turner was

wearing her brand-new hat, the pink job, and was so excited she could hardly sit still. For the past two weeks she'd been living at the outside limits of her endurance.

"Do? Why, get up and walk away. Fast. Go straight out the door and on home."

"That's all you'll need me?"

"That's all we'll need you. The man'll convict himself." The chief grinned amiably. "You're our finger girl, Miss Turner. In that new hat, you look real nice."

How Miss Turner got through the next few days to Saturday she didn't know. She couldn't concentrate on her actuarial tables at the office, and at home she had sieges of dropping cups and breaking out into hot and cold perspiration.

Her mother was annoyed. "What are you going around like an idiot for?"

Miss Turner said, "I don't know, mama."

"You don't know? Well, what bothers you?"

Miss Turner said she knew it was stupid — a really old maid idea — but she decided to tell it anyway. "Suppose Saturday night this maniac gets a good look at me, remembers what I look like, and later on recognizes me?"

"Recognizes you?"

"Yes. And after he's served his sentence, suppose he comes back for revenge?"

"Huh," Mrs. Turner said. "What a fool you are. You're not only unattractive, Marie, but you also have as little sense as a rabbit. In the first place, he wouldn't dare, what with the police on to him, and in the second place, we'll see that he *doesn't* recognize you."

"How?" Miss Turner wanted to know.

"We'll just make that hat veil of yours so thick he can't see through."

That was what she herself had had in the back of her head for days now, Miss Turner confessed, but she had been afraid it might make her look too got-up. Saturday evening after a final briefing over the phone by the chief, she groomed herself carefully and went downtown so heavily veiled several people turned around to look. A few of her acquaintances passed and didn't recognize her. In the veil, new hat and pink carnation pinned to her breast Miss Turner felt fairly safe.

She entered the cafeteria, got herself a cup of coffee on a tray and proceeded to the last table, which usually was empty because so many people passed by. The place was well filled. If she hadn't known, she would never have recognized the four occupants of the adjoining tables as detectives. They were eating supper off a tray and didn't glance at her once; and, after a while, she realized she'd been staring and decided she'd better stop it. Instead she played with the spoon and coffee. It was just 6:30, the hour set for the date. She stopped stirring.

Miss Turner shivered. If the man came in, how would he act? Would he be violent, would he put up a fight? Would they have to hit him, or handcuff him?

In the next fifteen minutes a lot of people walked in and out, many passing her table, but nobody stopped, looked interested, or looked remotely like a lunatic.

Miss Turner began to feel terribly nervous. Suppose he didn't show up, suppose the chief was right and he was really suspicious — that moment was peering through the window getting an idea, even with the veil, of what she looked like, and followed her home and in some dark, terrible place, out of a bush, say, would come leaping like a wild animal? Inside the veiling, Miss Turner's face became a running hotness, and in that moment it happened: unmistakably a man was approaching. He was coming straight down the aisle from the front entrance, heading toward her table. Maybe he'd go by, maybe he wouldn't. Miss Turner fell into a panic. He was short and squat, in a rough tweed overcoat, with a battered brown hat over his face and looked like anybody else middle-aged; you wouldn't look at him twice in a shooting gallery.

Miss Turner's heart pounded; she couldn't help edging backward in her chair. But she noticed with relief out of one corner of her eye that while the four detectives were still draped over their tables as before, their legs had come out from under the chairs and tables, ready to go.

Maybe, after all, the man would go on past.

"Oh, God," Miss Turner said audibly inside her veil. He wasn't going to pass. He came up to the table and lifted his hat. His face was pasty, and jowly, he had twinkly egg-blue eyes, and the head was balder than Chief Harrington's — with a fringe of dirty-brown grey hair. "You Phoebe?" The voice was unmistakable — the same coarse, laughing, illiterate quality — only now it was, to her surprise, quite embarrassed, even breathless.

Miss Turner's voice was at least five notes higher than usual. She didn't recognize it. "Yes. How do you do? Won't you sit down?"

"Pleasure." The man pulled out a chair and sat down. He was smiling politely, trying to penetrate the veil. After a moment, his assurance returned. "Whenever you want, you can take off the coverin', baby. I'd like to see what you look like."

Miss Turner thought it was the highlight of the whole affair. She was able to titter. "Sure. Why not? Be right back from the lady's room." And off she hopped. In that moment, without hurry or excitement, the four detectives simultaneously were up and around the man.

"What's this?" the man said, grinning. He didn't offer the least resistance. But there was no answer. The detectives hustled him over to

the plain black police car outside, and most of the diners didn't notice a thing, didn't even know an arrest was taking place. There was nothing to show for it, just a group of ordinary looking men walking out, peculiarly huddled, almost in step.

This was the man, all right. It was a splendid, even brilliant catch. But he was a complete fraud. An hour later that evening Chief Harrington phoned Miss Turner to tell her the news. He was a man named Pete Jones, a night watchman at a downtown office building — hence the night calls, except Saturday, his night off. He was a churchman, married, with three kids, had never been in trouble before, and was perfectly willing, in fact quite eager, to admit he was the one who'd been calling her. The only thing, Chief Harrington said, Jones claimed the whole thing had been a joke.

"A joke?" Miss Turner said, stunned.

"Yes. He says he was doing somebody a favor."

"A favor?"

"That's right."

Miss Turner felt sudden panic. "You mean there's still another lunatic at large who was in on it?"

The Chief smiled. "Don't get flustered, Miss Turner. Not quite. He claims somebody asked him to do it as a joke on you. Says it was one of your friends or associates. Says they gave him your telephone number, told him you were hot stuff, and said he should go ahead and give you the works, pull no punches over the telephone."

Miss Turner was incredulous. "But why?"

"So they could tease you about it afterward. All they told him was to ask for Phoebe. Says he doesn't have the slightest idea who he's been talking to."

"Who's this 'friend or associate'?" Miss Turner didn't try to hide her skepticism.

"He won't say."

"He won't?"

"No."

"Well, why not make him?"

"I tried," the Chief said. "He won't talk. On that score says nobody can make him talk. He doesn't want to get anybody in dutch."

Miss Turner thought it over and laughed. "Well, that's the best I've heard yet. I don't believe a word of it. It's ridiculous. He wasn't just spoofing. Not the way he talked over the phone. What about the way he demanded a date? What about the date he fixed for tonight?"

The Chief laughed helplessly. "Well," he said, "since this particular party told him you were so gorgeous, and terrific, a raving beauty, and *willing*, it would appear, he thought while he was about it he'd just go ahead on his own and see how far he could get. That was his own idea. He admits it. It wasn't part of the agreement."

"Well, so far as I'm concerned," Miss Turner said bitterly, "that's

enough for prosecution. But I suppose the way all of you are taking it, as a joke, that ends the case right there."

The Chief became businesslike again. "No," he said. Miss Turner could tell he was swiveling the cigar around in his mouth. "We've decided, even if his story is true, we're going to teach him a lesson he won't forget. We're going to ask for a stiff thirty day sentence plus a fine. You come down here quick as you can for the hearing."

"Me?"

"In view of his claiming it was a joke, we'll need you, after all, to swear out the warrant and identify him, to put the thing on ice."

"I thought my helping to trap him in the cafeteria was enough."

"Well, I've told you; it isn't." The Chief sounded as though he were getting a little tired, or anxious to get this silly business over with so he could go home. The hour was late.

"Oh, I wish you didn't need me," Miss Turner said.

"Why not?"

"I feel terribly flustery; I'm scared to death."

"Why?"

"When that awful man gets to know what I look like he'll come back after his thirty days and try to do me or my mother some harm."

She sounded just like someone looking under the bed, and this time the chief really laughed. "Take my word for it, Miss Turner. I can appreciate your concern, but this man is just a dope, perfectly harmless. He's sitting in there blubbering like a baby right now. He's so ashamed he wants to go find a hole and get lost. He'll eat right out of your hand."

"Oh, please, don't ask me," Miss Turner persisted.

"Now, look," the Chief said. He was getting really annoyed. There was no mistaking the authority.

"Well, all right," Miss Turner said. "I still can't believe it, not the way he talked, but I'll be right down. If I must I must. How long will it take? Will I be able to just pop in and out?"

"Of course," the Chief said. "Not more than a minute or two. All you have to do is say he's the man. You won't even have to take off your hat and coat."

Thirty minutes later Miss Turner got off the bus and went inside the stone building and the sergeant directed her to the entrance where the police magistrate for that month was presiding over night court.

The magistrate was up on the bench looking over the police report. Off to one side, in the press box, the Chief was chewing on his cigar and watching a cluster of night-duty boys matching pennies. The man, Pete Jones, was seated directly in front of the desk, shaking his head as though he couldn't believe it. He was red-eyed, and so completely crushed that Miss Turner had to

look twice. She remembered with amazement the self-possessed calmness of his voice on the telephone.

She walked in and went over to the chief, who smiled at her graciously and things began to get started. Jones was told to come up and be identified. He came forward with his head still down and stood that way, like a dozing mule, but when Miss Turner was called up beside him, Jones snapped his head around and couldn't take his eyes off her. He seemed to be fascinated. She was wearing the same veiled hat and pink carnation.

"All right," the magistrate said. He took a look. "Miss Turner, suppose you take off that lovely veil and let us get started. Once you've identified him it wont take more than two, three minutes. The man has admitted everything."

Miss Turner looked to the chief at her elbow. "Must I, Chief Harrington?"

The chief smiled reassuringly. "Must you what?"

"Take off my veil? You said I could just pop in and out."

The chief laughed pleasantly. "Sure. Accused must be confronted face to face. That's the law. You still afraid of him?"

"Yes."

The chief turned to the prisoner grimly. "Well, you don't have to be. We'll straighten this out right now. If this man ever molests you in any way, shape, or form again, we'll give him the works. A three year rap. Did you hear that, Jones?"

"Yessir, I heard you," Jones mumbled. He still couldn't take his eyes off Miss Turner. He was like a man in a trance. It was clear he didn't have a shred of courage left, just a kind of hypnosis.

"Well, all right," the magistrate said. He was getting impatient. "Miss Turner take the stand, remove your veil, and let's go."

Miss Turner went up to the stand, turned around, lifted both hands to the veil and tossed it back over her hat. Regardless what the chief had said, she was still scared to death. But there was nothing else to do. She was smiling like a ninny. It was a kind of trap. She'd never dreamed it would go this far.

"Okay," the magistrate said. "That's better. Now we'll move fast. Is that the man who called you on the telephone, told you obscenities, and in pursuance of an indecent proposal came up to you in the restaurant?"

There was no answer and after a split second all the reporters' heads snapped up to look. Miss Turner was staring at the prisoner. Jones had turned red, then absolutely dead white, then he laughed one quick abrupt laugh and finally took a stumbling step forward.

"Are you the lady I been talking to on the telephone?" It didn't have the slightest braggadocio. It was simply a pleading question.

Miss Turner tried, but couldn't answer. Only her mouth opened.

"She sure is," Chief Harrington said.

"My God." Jones turned his head to look at everybody in a dull stupid way. It was hard to tell if he was beginning to grin or beginning to cry.

The chief looked at him sharply. "What's the matter with you, Lothario? Now you see her, you disappointed, you dumbfounded?"

Jones' lips were quivering, opening and closing soundlessly as though he were full of some horrible thing.

"Oh, my God," he kept saying. Everybody looked at everybody else.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" the chief demanded.

"This woman," Jones said. You could barely hear him.

"What about this woman?"

"She's the one asked me to do it."

"What!" the chief said, sharply.

"She's the one asked me, I tell you. I wouldn't of told on her before if it cost me my life. I know her well. She's Miss Marie Turner from the big insurance office up on the 14th floor. I've known her twenty years. Always give me a kind word and a fine expensive Christmas present. Always real kind to me and my family. Always kidded with me real chummy in the halls every chance she had. Three weeks ago she gave me a ten-dollar bill and handed me this telephone number and said I should ask for a girl named Phoebe. Said I shouldn't stop calling until she gave me the word."

The magistrate was searching frantically on the docket. "It's Marie *P.* Turner, all right, chief," he said, finally. "P for Phoebe."

Jones went on as though he hadn't heard, speaking right to the magistrate, anywhere but where Miss Turner's eyes might be — glittering now at last with the same, fixed, hypnotized smile. He looked heartbroken, miserable, utterly demoralized. "She said this Phoebe was her good friend. Told me what kind of a girl she was, and told me lots of things about her past. Surprised me, *her* knowing her. But ten bucks is ten bucks. She said it would be a joke. She said there wasn't any limits to what I should say on the phone. Oh, Judge, I never had an idea. I never had an idea at all. How can it happen? How can a thing like this ever go and *happen*?"

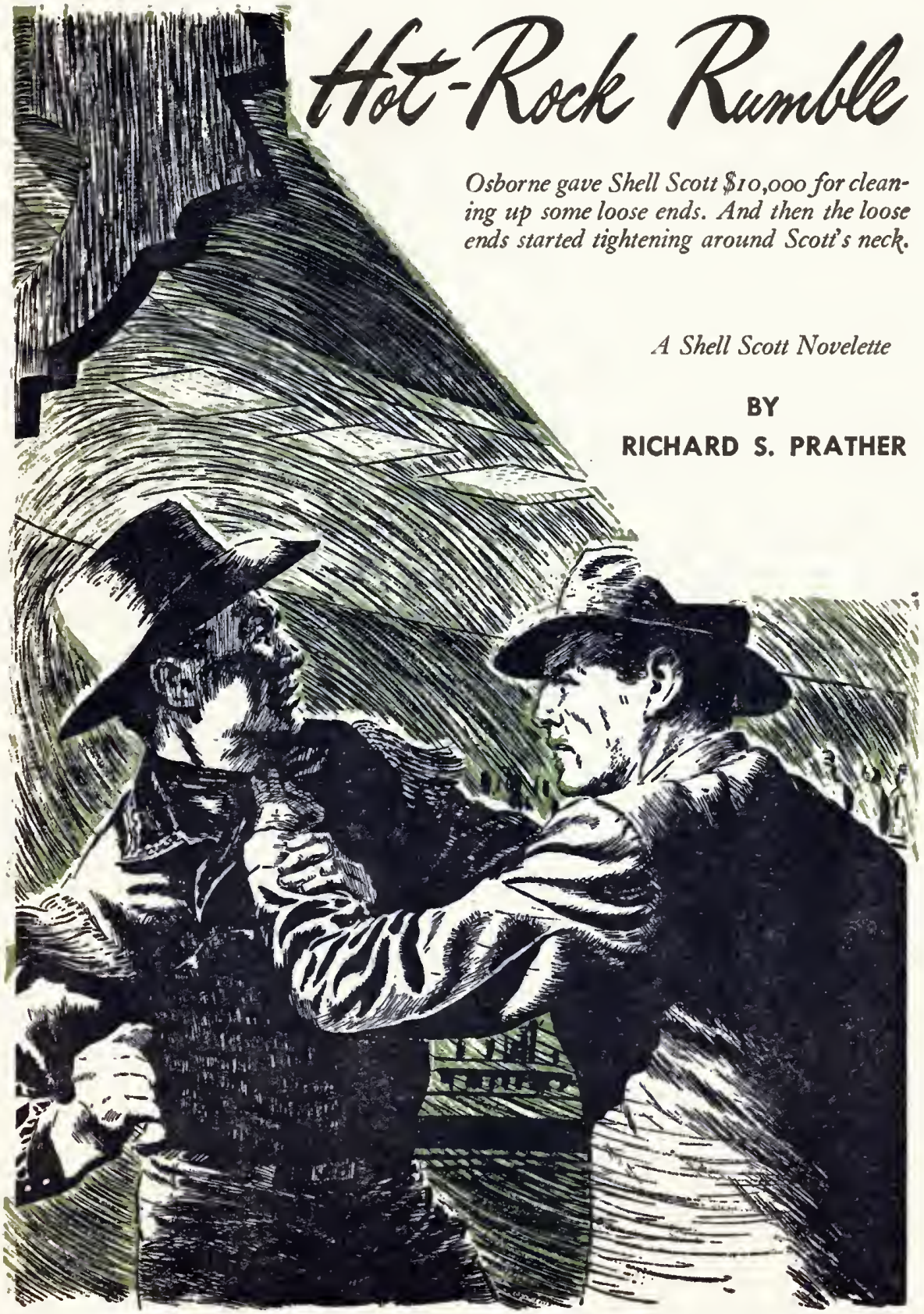
Hot-Rock Rumble

Osborne gave Shell Scott $10,000 for cleaning up some loose ends. And then the loose ends started tightening around Scott's neck.

A Shell Scott Novelette

BY

RICHARD S. PRATHER



Somehow Mr. Osborne didn't look like the type. He was a tall, distinguished-looking guy of about fifty, with all his hair still on his head, rimless glasses over his blue eyes, and about three-hundred dollars worth of clothes on his short body.

He'd come in through the door marked "Sheldon Scott, Investigations" at ten this morning and he'd given me his whole story in five minutes, his sentences clipped and to the point. About every minute he'd gone to the window that overlooks Broadway and peered out to see if his wife were standing down there screeching.

I said, "Sounds O.K. I'll get on it right away, Mr. Osborne."

"Thank you." He got up, found a thousand-dollar bill in his fat wallet and dropped the bill on my desk. "I hope that's all right for now. I'll give you the other nine thousand in cash too, if you're successful. Is that satisfactory?" He went over to the window again.

"Perfectly." I was admiring Cleveland's picture and the number one and three zeros in the bill's corner when he said, "Ohmigawd. There she is. She didn't shop long. She can spend more money faster than anybody I . . ." He let it trail off, turned and went sailing out without another word.

In his haste he left my office door standing open. I shut it, then walked to the window where he'd been standing. I saw him appear beside a plump woman in a fur coat. She put her hands on her hips and yacked something at him.

It seemed likely she was asking him where in the hell he'd disappeared to, because Mr. Jules Osborne had sneaked away from his wife to see me. I went back to my desk and looked at the notes I'd taken while he'd talked. Mr. Osborne had spent $100,000 on jewelry which, unknown to his wife, he had given to what he described as "an, ah, er, young lady." Two nights ago the jewelry had been stolen from the girl's — Diane Borden's — home. Diane missed her rocks so much that she brought forth an ultimatum: If Julie boy didn't replace them, or at least get the "old" ones back, Mrs. Jules Osborne might start hearing from the little birds. So, with a possible outlay of $100,000 staring him in the wallet, Jules was quite willing to pay me $10,000 if I could recover the originals.

Osborne hadn't gone to the police because he didn't want any record of this deal anywhere. He'd checked on me, satisfied himself I could be trusted, and laid his problem in my lap. And time was important because he'd said to me, "I can trust the jeweler, I'm sure. The only one I'm worried about is Diane. She's apt to go berserk any day. Any —" he groaned — "hour. If my wife finds out about this she'll gouge me for a million-a-year alimony. What with alimony and taxes I'll have to borrow money."

Anyway, Osborne wanted action.

Diane lived in a rent-free house on Genesee Street. I put the thousand bucks in my wallet, got my black Cad out of the parking lot, and headed for Hollywood.

As soon as I saw Diane I knew she must have given Jules his hundred-thousand-dollars worth. There were several things about Diane that were obvious, the first one being that she was a woman. A lot of women these days look like thin men, but not this kid. She was dressed in red-and-black hostess pajamas with a silver belt tied around her tiny waist. The pajama bottoms were the black part, with full flowing legs slit up the side to her knees, which I automatically assumed were dimpled and the red part was a thin, shimmering blouse which was crammed either with gigantic falsies or one hell of a lot of Diane.

She peered around the door and up at me, letting a strand of red hair droop fetchingly over one eye, and she said, "Hello, hello, hello."

I looked behind me but there was nobody else around. "That all for me?" I asked her.

"Sure. You're big enough for three helloes. You're Scotty, aren't you?"

"Shell Scott. How did you know?"

"Daddy phoned me. He said you'd come and see me." She had the door about halfway open and she slid around it, one arm and leg on each side of it and her body pressed against the thin edge. She was silent for a few seconds, smiling at me, then she said, "He told me you were big, and your nose was a little bent, and you had real short white hair that stuck up in the air, and I should be nice to you and help you any way I could." She laughed. "Come on in, Mr. Scotty. I'm Diane."

There was a chance conversation with this gal was going to be difficult. I walked by her but before I got past she said, "He didn't tell me about the funny white eyebrows. They glued?" She reached out and playfully tugged at one.

"No," I said. "They are not glued. And I —"

"You bring my jewels?"

"What the hell —"

"I know you didn't. I was just teasing. Don't be mad. Come in and sit down. You want a drink or anything?"

"Nope. I want some conversation. You sit down in a chair clear the hell across the room from me and let's talk. O.K.?"

She pretended to pout, which let me notice how full and sensually curving her lower lip was. While I sat down she plopped into a chair and crossed her legs. That black cloth parted at the slit and fell away from skin that looked white and soft as a cloud. Then she bounced up and sat on a long gray divan for half a second, then rolled over and lay on her stomach looking at me. She was a little fluffy bit of a thing, very young — maybe seventeen I figured, all curves and bounce and energy.

She was beginning to make me feel decrepit and full of hardened arteries at thirty.

Finally we got around to the jewelry. On my way here I'd stopped at Montclair Jewelers, where Osborne had bought the stuff, and picked up a typed list and description of the missing items. Osborne had arranged to have it ready for me. The pieces were mostly diamonds, with a couple of emerald brooches thrown in. I checked the list against Diane's memory, which was just as good as the list, then asked her to tell me what she could of the actual theft.

She rolled over onto her back, stretched her arms above her head, and presented such a charming picture that I hardly heard what she was saying. But she told me she'd gone with "Daddy" to an out-of-the-way spot and worn some of her diamonds. Back home, after Mr. Osborne had gone, she'd left the stuff on top of her bedroom dresser alongside the jewel box.

She said, "And when I woke up yesterday morning the little pretties were just gone. I'd locked the doors when Daddy left and they were still locked this morning. Windows too. But it was all just gone. Some robbers stole it all."

"You mean somebody walked right into your bedroom and lifted the rocks without your knowing anything about it?"

"Well, they must have. I sleep sounds enough, but if anybody was banging around and flashing lights and things it should have awakened me." She giggled at me. "I wasn't very tired, anyway."

"Yeah. You know, I expected to find you all broken up, yanking your hair out and wailing. You sure you want these things back?"

"Well, I like that. You want me to run around bawling and yelling 'My jewels, my jewels'?" She was still smiling and didn't seem angry. "Now, wouldn't that be silly, really? I really feel bad, but Daddy said you'd get them back . . . or else he'd get me some more. So it's not like my little old pretties were gone forever."

"I was just thinking, wouldn't it be a big laugh if you still had those little old pretties around somewhere and I naturally can't find the robbers and you get another hundred grand's worth from Da — ah, from your father?"

She sat up straight on the couch. "Let me think about that a minute," she said. Then she laughed, flopped back on the couch and threw her legs up in the air. "Oh, how funny," she said. "That *would* be a scream. But I never thought of it — wish I had. And he's not my father, you silly. You know what I hope?"

"No, what do you hope?"

"That those robbers didn't see me." She swung her legs around to the floor, got up and scooted across the room and curled up on the floor at my feet. She put her arms on my knees, leaned forward and said, "If they saw the diamonds, right in my

bedroom there, and stole them, they must have been able to see me it seems like. And golly I hope they didn't. I don't sleep with anything on, nothing at all, you know, and I'm restless. I kick and turn and wallow around all night I guess. Almost always I wake up all uncovered." She shook her head and let red hair fly around.

I said in a voice that was practically normal, "And if those robbers did see you, you'd better lock and bar all the doors tonight, because they'll be here again come hell or high-water, jewels or no jewels. Now go back to your couch."

She laughed and said, "You're fun. You know, you're lots of fun. And you know what I meant. Well, what else do you want to know?"

"You got any picture of you wearing some of the rocks?"

"Just a minute." She got up, taking her arms and whatnot off my shaking knees, and trotted out of the room on bare feet. I hadn't noticed before that she was barefooted, but then I've never been much of a guy to look at feet.

She came back with two snapshots and a nightclub photo in which she was practically sagging under the weight of diamonds and emeralds. The nightclub photo showed a necklace, pin, and bracelet clearly. The dress she'd been wearing was strapless, and the photo showed Diane clearly, and it was clearly all Diane.

"You can borrow the pictures," she said. "Daddy took the first two snaps, and he was in the other — but he cut himself out. Well, what now?"

"Now I go look for these things. And I'd be awfully sad if there weren't any robbers."

"There you go again. Don't be so nasty. Somebody stole them, all right. You have to go right away?"

"Immediately." I stood up. I looked at her for a minute and said, "Aren't you being a little rough on the guy? I mean this business of either you get the rocks back or it costs him another hundred G's? The guy might collapse from anxiety, start selling his Cadillacs, get rocks in his head —"

"Wait a minute." She got about half sober, raised an arched eyebrow and looked me up and down slowly. Then she said, "Come on now. You know better than that. I'm doing him a favor. A lot of men think price is value. Daddy wouldn't have a Cadillac if it only cost five hundred dollars."

I blinked at her, thinking that maybe her brain wasn't as soft as I'd suspected. Then she went back to normal and wiggled a little and smiled at me, and I thought: Hang on, Scott, you'll be out of here in a minute and Jules isn't paying you for what you're thinking. I started for the door and Diane walked along with me, hanging onto my arm, which also started getting hot.

"If you find them," she said, "you bring them back to me. Don't take them to Daddy. They're mine."

"Don't worry. I'm not supposed to go within a mile of him. I'll bring them to you — if I find them."

She opened the door and slid around it again in that oddly interesting fashion. "All right," she said smiling, "just you don't sneak in at night like they did, and leave them on the dresser."

I grinned. "If I do, Miss, I'll look the other way."

"Sure," she said. "Away from the dresser." She giggled. "I bet you make lots of money."

"Not that much. And it all goes in taxes. Well, goodbye, Miss."

" 'Bye, Mr. Scotty."

I went out onto the porch and just before she shut the door she said, "Don't call me Miss." I looked over my shoulder at her and she said, "Call me Diane." She took one arm off the door and kind of waved it at me, letting her hand fall limp from her wrist, then winked at me and said, "And listen, you. I'm older than I look."

Then she shut the door and I thought about sitting down on the grass and rolling around howling, and I thought about jumping up and running back and crashing through the door, but what I did was go out to the Cad and lean my head against the cool steering wheel for a couple seconds, then shiver spasmodically and put the buggy in gear thinking that Jules Osborne should have told me more about Diane, and offered me at least twenty thousand dollars.

At the office I reviewed what little I knew and phoned Burglary Division in City Hall to refresh my memory. Then I propped my Cordovans on the desk and thought for a couple minutes. Starting about three months back there had been a number of night burglaries in and near Los Angeles, ranging from Beverly Hills to Boyle Heights. This particular rash of burglaries totaled nine reported so far; the m.o. was the same in all of them and unlike any known gang which Burglary had any record of. The capers always came off between ten at night and two in the morning, there was never any sign that doors or windows had been forced. Nobody had ever reported any lights in the burgled houses though some of the jobs had been pulled off next door to houses in which parties were going on or in which the occupants were chatting or watching television. The doors were always still locked when the people got home to find their jewels, money, furs, silver gone. The jobs had been well cased and the hauls were always good ones, the loot taken from wealthy people. The burglars had never been seen or heard, and Burglary didn't have a solitary lead.

Homicide was interested too, because on one job, which both Burglary and Homicide agreed was obviously the work of the same ten-to-two gang, a wealthy attorney named William Drake had been murdered. And in messy fashion. It

was assumed that he'd left his wife at a party and come home alone while the gang was in his big house on San Vicente Boulevard — the coroner set the time of death at around midnight — and the attorney had been brutally beaten by what must have been an exceedingly powerful man. The attorney's face was a pulp, and one blow had broken his neck. He'd also been shot, a bullet from a .45 caliber automatic blowing away much of his brain.

Three of the jobs had been in the section between Wilshire Boulevard and Pico, the area in which Diane Borden lived, and there was a fair chance that Diane's pretties had been number five. The m.o. seemed the same in every particular.

I took my feet off the desk and made half a dozen more phone calls, then left the office and talked to a shoe-shine boy, two cab drivers, a bookie's runner, a bartender, and a barber. With several lines out I went back to the office and waited for a bite.

A lot of any private detective's time is spent in waiting, and more cases are broken with phones than with guns. At the core of any investigator's success, whether he's police or private, are his "sources of information," the informants, informers, stoolies, canaries. That's the unofficial staff. Over the years in Los Angeles I'd built up a long list of them and many of them were now, I hoped, out working for me — or might, already, know something that would help. I'd dropped several words in several places, and sent out a thumbnail description of some of the most distinctive items I was interested in.

At three o'clock I got a nibble and, though I didn't know it then I landed a whale. The call was from an alcoholic hoodlum with the unlikely name of Joseph Raspberry, and he wanted me to meet him in the back booth of Manny's bar on Sixth. He also wanted me to bring him a sawbuck. I told him to order a shot on me, that I'd be there in ten minutes. On my way over I wondered if he had anything. Joseph Raspberry was a two-time loser who, when sober, was a good thief. I'd picked him up a year ago and found him carrying a gun, which isn't encouraged by parole boards — and he was on parole at the time. I gave him a break, which was illegal from the strictest point of view, but which if enforced strictly would put all the cops and private detectives in the clink. Since then Joe had stayed out of stir and passed along a dozen tips to me, about half of which paid off, and one of which helped me break a murder case. The other half-dozen tips were fakes, pure and simple, and he dreamed them up because he wanted money for his sweetheart, Old Crow and Coca Cola. I always gave him a ten or so, because there was always another time, another tip. Then, too, when he wasn't hitting the pot he was a likable character. I didn't

know much about him, and even the odd name might have been a fake or a monicker. Anyway, I usually got a charge out of him, kind of liked the guy for no good reason.

But this looked like one of the days when Joe needed money for his sweetheart. He was huddled in the gloom of a booth at the rear of Manny's, his thin face pinched, hands shaking, lips twitching once in a while. I sat down opposite him and he said, "Scott, Manny wouldn't gimme a drink. An' I ain't got a bean."

"You had any breakfast, Joe?"

"Sure. Alka Seltzer and alcohol. Tell him it's O.K., huh?"

I waved at Manny and he waddled over, wiping his hands on a reasonably white apron. "A beer for me, Manny," I said. "And a couple shots for Joe."

I always felt funny about buying a drink for Joe — or any of the others like him. But if he didn't get it from me he'd get it from somebody else, somehow. He was sick, but it wasn't my job to try healing all the sick people. When the shots arrived Joe started to lift one of them but his hand was shaking so much he knew he'd spill it. He put his fingers around the jigger, pressing his hand against the table, then bent forward and got his lips on the rim of the glass and sucked. He lifted the jigger then and tossed the whiskey down. He didn't spill a drop.

I sipped my beer and waited. Finally he shuddered, pulled the other shot over in front of him and, looking at it, said, "I got something for you."

I put a ten-dollar bill in front of him. He licked his lips and said, "Gimme a pencil." I found a pencil stub in my pocket and gave it to him. He started drawing on a napkin. It took him three minutes, but he didn't touch the other shot till he'd finished. Then he lifted the glass, his hand not shaking so much this time, and tossed the drink off.

He pointed at the napkin. "Lupo seen me and says you been askin' for somethin' like that. If it's right, it's worth more'n a saw, ain't it?"

The drawing was crude: a bracelet with a lot of diamonds, and curving off from it a snake's head with the tongue licking out and two oversized eyes in its head. It could have been something to get excited about, because crude as it was it looked like the bracelet Diane had been wearing in the nightclub photo. I had the picture in my pocket, but I didn't take it out yet. Joe just might have made his drawing from the description I'd sent around.

I said, "Could be," took a twenty-dollar bill from my wallet and wrapped it around my finger. He reached for it, but I said, "The story first, Joe. The ice looks right, maybe, but give me what you've got. And don't make any of it up, even if you haven't got much."

"Sure. I'll level with you, Scott." He hesitated. "I give you some bum ones, but this one's the McCoy. I

seen it. Yesterday it was. It was on Wilcox, that's all I know for sure. I was . . . wasn't feelin' good."

That meant he'd been drunk. He licked his lips and looked at the empty shot glasses. I waved at Manny. And a minute later, over the filled glasses, with Joe's sharp whiskey breath in my nostrils, I got fragments of a story from him, the rest of it still lost somewhere in his drunkard's brain. There wasn't any sound in the quiet of Manny's except Joe's voice, and as he talked I could almost see what had happened through Joe's eyes, everything out of shape, part of a different world with darker shadows and brighter sun, a strange and unreal and exaggerated world that Joe often lived in.

I could see him on the street, his throat aching for a drink, his body hungry for it. He stumbled in off the street into a bar and there was this guy. "He was a tall guy," Joe said, "Jesus, he was clear up to the ceiling, ten feet tall he was and he was stooped over by this booth thing, a kind of funny little booth thing there that had a doll in it. He give her the hoop and she put it on. I was right inside the door a little, next to the dumb thing she was in, and I seen it good. The eyes was red like the snake was alive on it, just like it was alive there." He talked in a monotone, slowly twirling the shot glass. "She took it and put it on and the big guy took it off of her, squeezin' her a little, and stuck it in her purse there. I was right up alongside them then, I thought she was at a bar but it wasn't no bar, and then the big guy seen me. He gimme a shove, for nothin', just shoved me back up on the wall and the whole place was goin' around. I tried to tell him I just wanted a drink and he picked me up and pushed me out. Like to ripped my head off."

"This guy, Joe. How big you say he was?"

"He was ten feet tall. Don't laugh, I'm not lyin'. He was at least twice as big as me, ten feet tall, clear up to the ceiling he was."

If it hadn't been for the crude drawing Joe had made I might have left then; if there was any truth in the story it seemed so distorted that it wouldn't help me. But I asked him, "What about the girl? What did she look like?"

"I dunno. But I seen her leave and I followed her."

"Why?"

He blinked at me and didn't answer for almost a minute. "I seen where she lived," he said finally.

That was enough, and it made sense to me. Joe was a good thief between cures, but when he needed a shot he'd steal anything. From a baby carriage — to a diamond bracelet. He went on, "I don't 'member what she looked like, but she had a walk like nothing I ever seen. It was a circus, Scott."

"Where'd she go?"

"Right acrost from Polly's. Right on the corner. You know it?"

Polly's was a beer joint where you could place a bet in the back room. I knew the spot. "You're sure, Joe? You got this straight?"

"Yeah," he said. "It don't seem real, does it?" He licked his lips again. "But it's straight, Scott. I give it to you straight."

I took out the nightclub photo and showed it to him. "On the doll's wrist. That look near enough?"

He bent over the print, then looked up at me, a pleased expression on his face. "That's it. I swear, that's it. But that ain't the doll. I'm pretty sure it ain't."

I gave him the twenty. "Anything else, Joe?"

He shook his head, spread the money out before him on the table. I stood up. "Thanks."

He nodded and waved at Manny.

"Joe," I said, "give a listen. Why don't you spend some of that for a big steak? Get yourself —"

He interrupted angrily. "Lemme be. I give you what you was after, didn't I? Now leave me be."

"Sure. See you. And the hell with you." I was sorry as soon as I said it, but Joe was a nice enough guy when he was sober. He'd made me laugh plenty of times, and there are too few things to laugh at. I didn't like seeing him slopped up most of the time, so I barked at him.

He laid a hand on my arm, shaking his head. "Don't get a heat on, Scott. Just lemme be."

"Sure, Joe. Cheers." I left. The sun was almost blinding after the gloom in Manny's and I stood outside for a moment wondering if Joe had told me anything at all. The story was just crazy enough, though, that it was probably true — as true as Joe could get it. I got in the Cad and drove toward Hollywood and Polly's. A diamond bracelet with a snake's head and rubies for eyes, a guy ten feet tall, and a gal with a walk like a circus. I knew, from Joe's description, where to look for the gal: the left half of a duplex — if there was a gal. It was worth a check.

She was a tall, willowy tomato with dark hair and the unashamed curves of a modern Venus in white sweater, black skirt and spike-heeled pumps, and she came out of the duplex on Wilcox Street like a gal in a hurry. I hadn't got a good look at her since I'd staked out near the duplex on the corner, but in the hour I'd waited for her to show I'd deduced a few interesting things about her from the frilly black underthings hanging on a line behind her place. But not even the transparent and abbreviated step-ins hanging there, nor Joe's fuzzy words, had prepared me for her walk. Walk?

That wasn't a walk; it was a parade. Wilcox Street should have been curved into a horseshoe lined with bald-headed pappies chipping their choppers and falling down in dead faints while a band played "Put The Blame On Mame, Boys!" And there should have been a drum.

I fell in about fifteen yards behind her and followed, let's face it, grimly intent on my job and wondering how she made any forward progress at all.

After two blocks she still hadn't looked back. I was carrying a brown tweed coat over one arm and a hat in my hand, and there were dark glasses in my shirt pocket. In case she got a look at me I could put the stuff on and look a bit different except that I'd still be six-two. But my preparations for a cagy tail seemed wasted, because she apparently didn't expect anyone to be following her. Maybe there was no reason she should have. She certainly wasn't sneaking up the street.

She kept going like that for another block and I followed her happily. Just across the next street was a small cocktail lounge with a sign over the door: Zephyr Room. She went inside. I followed her in, stopped inside the door and looked around as my eyes got accustomed to the dimness. She'd disappeared somewhere, but there were booths on the left, four or five people in them, and a bar extending from the back halfway up the right wall. This side of the bar, at its end, was a small U-shaped table with a stool behind it. I felt a little tingle of exhiliration; that must be the "kind of funny little booth thing" that Joe had mentioned. He'd been in here, all right.

I went to the bar and climbed onto a stool next to a cowboy leaning against the bar. At least he thought he was a cowboy; he was wearing high-heeled boots and tight blue jeans, a white-trimmed black shirt, and a black neckerchief looped around his neck and tucked through a small silver cow's skull at his throat. He was real quaint.

I ordered a bourbon and water and while the bartender mixed it I reached into my inside coat pocket and took out the neatly typed list of stolen items I'd got from Osborne's jeweler. I made a few random checkmarks on it with a pencil, not being careful about hiding the list from possibly prying eyes, and when the bartender brought my drink I turned the paper face down on the bar and asked him, "Did a sharp brunette just wobble in here?"

"Wobble?" He looked puzzled, then he grinned. "You must mean Lois. Yeah, she'll be out in a minute." He jerked his head toward the U-shaped table. "Dice girl."

"Thanks." I started to pull at my highball when the cowboy flipped me on the shoulder with the back of his fingers.

"What makes you so curious?" he said. His voice was soft and gritty, like sand running through an hour glass. I didn't say anything and he said, "Well?" and flipped me again with his fingers.

I wasn't even looking at the guy, minding my drink and my business, but just that fast I was mad enough to hit him with the bar. Maybe I'm touchy, maybe I'm even a little

neurotic about it, but this guy had done the wrong things — a couple of them. In the first place, I don't mind strangers blabbing at me or asking questions — if they ask them nice; he wasn't asking nice. And in the second place I don't like guys flipping me or grabbing me or even laying their paws on me.

I swallowed at my drink, then wheeled on my stool and looked at the foolish character just as he said, "I asked you a question, Pally."

I took a good look at him this time. He was about an inch under six feet and broad, big-chested, and with more hair sticking up from his shirt than I've got on my head. His face was square, and his eyes were narrowed, lips pressed together as he looked at me.

I said, "I heard you. Don't ask me questions, don't call me Pally, and keep your hands off me." I turned back to the bar and got the highball glass just to my lips when he latched onto my arm and pulled me around.

He started to say something, but I slammed my glass down on the bar and climbed off my stool as liquor squirted up and spread over the mahogany. I grabbed the guy by his scarf and said, "Listen, pardner, the next time you lay a hand on me you better take off those high heels and get your feet planted square on the floor, because I'll knock you clear into the men's room."

His mouth dropped open and for a moment he sputtered in surprise, then his chin snapped up and his face got white. He wrapped a hand around my wrist and drew back his right fist so he could slug me, and I almost felt sorry for what was going to happen to the cowboy. Even if he couldn't know I was an ex-Marine crammed full of more judo and unarmed defense than I knew what to do with, he should never have tried hauling off while I still had hold of his pretty scarf and he was wide open from all directions.

But he was stupid, and he actually launched his right fist at me. I gave just a little tug on the scarf and he staggered maybe two inches and the fist missed me four inches, and he was so far off balance I had all the time in the world to grab his left arm above the elbow, then break his weakened hold on my wrist and force his wrist and arm behind him with my right hand. While he was still bending over and turning I locked his arm behind him, got some leverage from my hand on his shoulder, and he started to make noises. I was still trying to decide if I should break the arm for him, when the bartender swung a two-foot club against the bar top and yelled, "None of that! Shove it, boys, break it up."

He was pretty fast, because we'd been mixing it up for only a couple seconds — and I think he saved the cowboy's arm. I cooled off a little, nodded at the bartender, and pushed the cowboy ahead of me while I walked him four stools away. Then I let go of him.

"Maybe you better sit here, Cow-

boy. You must have thought I was kidding. I wasn't." I went back and got his drink and sat it in front of him. He didn't do anything more dangerous than glare at me, so I went back to my drink.

The bartender was squinting at me. I said, "Sorry," then finished the bourbon and ordered another. He made it silently and I noticed there hadn't been a peep out of any of the other half-dozen or so customers. Two of them left, but the others ordered more drinks. A little conversation started up again.

I asked the bartender, "Where is the men's room, anyway?" He pointed toward a door in the rear wall and I got up, leaving the list on the bar, and went back to the john. I went in, slammed the door, then cracked it and peeked through. The cowboy rubbed his arm, glanced at the paper on the bar then looked back toward the rest room. He was good and curious about me. Five more seconds and he got up, walked to my stool and said something to the bartender, then turned the paper over and studied it for half a minute before he slammed it back down on the bar and walked toward me and then out of my sight.

I went back to my stool. The bartender had mopped up my spilled drink and I said, "Freshen that up, will you? You got a phone booth in here?"

He nodded and pointed toward the back of the bar and around to the right. That was where my cowboy had gone. I tucked the list back into my pocket, had a swallow of my drink. In another minute the cowboy came back. He walked up beside me and smiled stiffly.

"Say," he said. "I wanna apologize. About gettin' hot."

I grinned at him. "Sure. Maybe we're both a little touchy."

He looked damned uncomfortable, but he stuck out his hand. "No hard feelings?"

"O.K. by me." I shook his hand.

He lowered his voice a little and said, "I didn't mean to sound nosy, but the thing is, a good friend of mine is real innerested in Lois, see? So naturally I'm curious. You, uh, know Lois?"

I shook my head.

"You just think she's cute, huh?"

"That's right. I just think she's cute."

"Yeah," he said. "Uh, I'd feel bad if you didn't lemme buy you a drink. No hard feelings, you know, lemme buy you a drink."

I hesitated and he said to the bartender, "Hey, Frank, give my friend anything he wants, see? Gimme the same."

Right then I caught movement at the corner of my eye and turned to see Lois walking toward us from the rear of the club. Evidently there was a room back there where she'd changed because she now had on an ankle-length green gown. She walked past us and said to the bartender, "A cool one like this, Frank." She nodded at the cowboy, then her

eyes brushed briefly over mine. I grinned at her as she went by, and after a couple more steps she looked back over her shoulder, and she must have seen where I was looking, then she was at the dice table and reached up to turn on a bright light above it. I'd had a good gander at her as she walked past us and the view was even better with her under that bright light.

The green dress came clear up to her throat then swept down over her body, clinging to her skin like a thin rubber dress a size too small. I'd have given eight to five that she wasn't wearing a thing under that dress, not a thing, not even frilly things. The dress was like green skin and I decided I could even get used to green skin if it were on Lois.

The bartender mixed up a drink, also green, and sat it on the end of the bar, then gave the cowboy and me our highballs. I picked mine up, got the green thing from the end of the bar, and walked to the dice table.

I handed her the drink. "This must be yours."

She smiled. "Uh-huh. To match my dress. Pink Ladies for a red dress, creme de cacao for brown. This is creme de menthe."

I pressed my luck. "I thought for a minute the dress was made out of creme de menthe."

She didn't mind. She smiled and said. "You like it?"

"It's terrific. Clever idea, too. What do you wear with champagne?"

She laughed, and the laugh itself was a little bit like champagne, a soft, bubbling sound that came from far down in her white throat. "That's a rhetorical question, isn't it?"

"Frankly, no." The overhead light burned soft red spots in her dark hair, hair that hung just above shoulder length. It wasn't quite black, as I'd thought at first, but an off shade like the bar mahogany, a shadow darkness with touches of deep red in it. I had known a couple of dice girls in Hollywood and several in San Francisco where they're more often seen. Some of them were near idiots, and some were brilliant women who could have been high-powered women executives but made so much at the tables that they stuck to the game. One thing, though, all of them had in common: they were beautiful women, the kind men would look at, women who could make men cheerfully lose a dime or a thousand bucks. Lois was no exception, and she didn't sound or look stupid. Her face was oval, with dark brown eyes and warm-looking red lips, lips that were still smiling now with white, even teeth behind them.

I reached for my wallet and started to take a buck out of it, then changed my mind and found a twenty, laid it on the green felt.

"What part of that?" she asked.

"All of it. I feel lucky."

"I like to tell the nice fellows they can't win in the long run."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at her, at the way the dice table fit just over her thighs as she sat on the low

stool, light pouring down over her shoulders and silvering the top of her breasts, highlighting their thrusting tips and leaving pools of shadow beneath them, and I added, "But they can't lose."

She looked at me for long seconds, her brown eyes half-lidded, then she said, "Shoot it all."

She shoved one of the leather shakers over to me and I rattled the dice then rolled them up against the board. She looked at them, called my points and picked up the other shaker, held it in front of her and shook the dice vigorously.

She rolled the dice. "See?" she said. "You lose."

I grinned. "That breaks me. What am I going to do for dinner tonight?"

"I don't know," she smiled. "Will you really go hungry?"

"Maybe I can bum a meal."

"Maybe. Are you really broke?"

"Huh-uh. Just fishing. Carefully."

"You don't look like the careful type."

"Depends."

I had noticed something block out the dim light coming in through the entrance. I'd been so interested in conversation that I hadn't looked around, but now the cowboy stepped up on my left.

"Hey, Pally," he said.

I very clearly heard him say "Pally." I looked at him.

There was a tight grin on his square face. "Remember, a friend of mine was innerested in Lois?"

"So he's innerested. So am I. So what?"

"So here's my good friend, Pally." He jerked a thumb.

I looked around at where I figured the guy's face would be and I was looking, so help me, at his tie clasp. I looked up. And up. And there it was. He wasn't a man, but a monstrosity. When I found his face I didn't recognize the features right away because I'd been too busy wondering when I'd get to it, but a few seconds after I saw the long thin head with the bony cheekbones and long sharp nose, the wide-spaced dark eyes and high forehead dwindling into wispy brown hair, I made him. Once you've seen a guy that big, you don't have much trouble remembering him.

Back in '45 you couldn't pick up a sports page without seeing his name and face. He'd been in college then, *the* basketball star of the States, center on the Indians, national high-scorer. Too big for any of the services, he'd made a name for himself on the courts. Maybe you remember his name: Tommy Matson, and they called him Cannonball Matson. Since then the nickname had been shortened to Cannon. In '46 he'd turned pro, finally been kicked out of the game because of excessive roughness, near brutality — and because he'd been questioned by the San Francisco D.A. about some fixed games; questioned and let go. After that he'd drifted. His name didn't hit the

sports pages any more, but I remembered he'd been picked up for battery, released, then did a bit for second-degree burglary, a daylight job on which he hadn't carried a gun. The last I heard he'd been arrested in San Francisco, this time for first-degree burglary, a night job, but again he'd been without a gun. Cannon had been sent to San Quentin for that one. I'd brushed against him a few times on cases of mine, but I'd never been on his tail. He knew me, though, and didn't like me; I'd helped put a couple of his friends away.

I could feel my throat tighten up. The guy wasn't ten feet tall, he was a long six-feet-nine and a lumpy three hundred pounds, but Joe's story wasn't so crazy any more. This was the boy Joe had seen in here yesterday. I turned around with my back to the dice table and said, "Hello, Cannon. I heard you fell from 'Frisco. Didn't know you were down this way."

"Now you know." He looked past me to Lois. "This chump bothering you, honey?"

"He's not bothering me, Cannon."

"I figure he is."

I butted in. "I think the lady knows more about it than you do, Cannon. And you know my name. It's not chump."

The cowboy said, "It's Pally. Ain't that right, Pally?"

I looked at him. "You got a short memory, friend. Next time I'll put a hinge in your elbow." Actually, right at that moment, I didn't feel too happy about all this. Another guy had come inside with Cannon and was standing by him. He was a little short guy about six feet tall, slim, bald, about forty-five. There was a scar, probably a knife scar, on his forehead just where his hairline should have been. That made four guys lined up against me, counting Cannon as two.

"Move along, Scott," Cannon said.

"I'm busy." I turned my back on him and said to Lois, "Guess we were interrupted. And I was just about to ask you something."

She was frowning, biting her lower lip. "I know," she said.

From behind me Cannon said softly, "I want you should blow, Scott, and keep going, and don't come back."

I felt a hand yank on my arm. As it spun me around I saw that it was the cowboy pulling at me and I made a mistake and concentrated on him. He got hold of my coat sleeves with both hands just as I started to chop at his face with the edge of my palm and maybe cave his face in for him, but I was concentrating on the wrong guy.

I heard Cannon grunt on my left, and I saw the big fist swooping down at my head, and I rolled with the punch just a fraction of a second too late. I was rolling when he hit me, and I damn near rolled over the dice table into Lois' lap, and a gray film dropped down over my eyes.

My muscles were suddenly like jelly and when I felt Cannon's big hand bunch up my coat and pull me toward him I was having a hard enough time keeping my legs straight under me, much less getting a fist up to his chin. I fought to clear my head as I heard Cannon say huskily, "I said blow, and stay the hell gone," and then I saw the dim blur of his fist looming up in front of me again, and just as I rolled my head to the side my head finally cleared. Everything got very clear and very black.

I was in a booth. It seemed pretty sure that I was in a booth, but I didn't yet know where the booth was. I had just got my face up off the table and slowly I remembered what had happened. I wiggled my jaw, and pain cleared fog from my brain. I looked around. Lois was walking from the bar toward me, and because my eyes hadn't yet focused properly it was as though there were two of Lois walking at me, and the way just one of her navigated this was almost more than man could bear. But when she reached the table she was back to one, and it was one shot glass she put in front of me.

"Brandy," she said.

"Thanks." I drank it, waited half a minute, then started to stand up. "Where is that . . . that . . . that . . ."

I was coming out of the booth when she put a hand on my chest and said, "Sit down. I admire your stupidity, but they've left. Hadn't you better relax for a while?"

"I've been relaxed for a long while." I sat down and as she slid into the seat opposite me I said, "What's going on out there now?"

"Nothing. All the customers left too."

"They show remarkable good sense."

"Cannon and Tinkle and Artie looked through your clothes and wallet, then put everything back and left."

"That's great." I thought a minute. "Tinkle?" I asked her. "Tinkle Miller?" It had to be; there wouldn't be another hoodlum with the same monicker.

"Uh-huh, the cowboy. And Artie Payne. And you're Shell Scott. A detective."

I looked across the table at her. "True. Is that bad?"

"I didn't say that. But it made me . . . wonder."

"Yeah. I suppose it would." I didn't add anything to that; I wasn't going to con the gal; she could take her chances or leave them. I said, "I didn't know you'd chosen Cannon."

"I didn't. He chose me. He's . . . after me, you might say. But he hasn't got me yet."

"I imagine he'd put on quite a campaign. He'd have to. You know, flowers, candy, pretty baubles, things like that."

"Things like that. He ordered me to stay away from you."

"I had you picked as a gal to ask, not to order."

"I am."

"Well, I'm asking."

"What and when?"

"Dinner. Tonight."

"Maybe." She glanced toward the door. "Couple customers," she said. "I have to get back to the table." She left. Naturally I watched her walk away.

I ordered and slowly drank a last water-high while I added some bits and pieces. Tinkle Miller. A hood who'd been lucky with convictions, but had been charged with half the book, mostly suspicion of burglary. A Jack-of-all-trades hoodlum, he'd been a dishwasher, bank clerk and burglar, labor goon and locksmith, soda jerk and short-con man, strike-breaker, and, of course, a cowboy. I filed the one important point in my aching head and added some more. Yesterday Joe had stumbled in here in an alcoholic haze, seen Cannon bestowing a pretty bauble on Lois. I wondered about Lois. Today Tinkle Miller had seen a similar pretty bauble among those on my typed list, called Cannon and Artie Payne, and Cannon had proceeded to knock me silly. It looked pretty good. I got up.

On my way out I stopped at the dice table. Lois was alone there and I said, "Well?"

She nibbled on the inside of her lip. "Where we going?"

"Grove O.K.?"

"Cocoanut Grove?"

"Uh-huh. Then the Strip, Ciro's, Mocambo, maybe catch Kay Thompson and the Williams Brothers."

"Your face is already swollen. Won't you mind?"

"I'll put ice packs on it."

"I'm supposed to work."

"Get a headache. Then we'll be even."

"All right."

"You got a long slinky dress you feel like trying out?"

She smiled. "Umm-hmmm. Long . . . and low."

"Wonderful." I grinned at her. "What color?"

She looked up at the ceiling, then slanted her eyes down at me, lips curving into an amused smile, slightly wicked. "Rum and coke."

"The time and the place?"

She scribbled on a paper and handed it to me. I looked at it and said, "So long, Lois. See you at nine."

"So long, Shell. Don't be late."

"You kidding?" I left. It was just getting dark.

I reached the Spartan Apartment Hotel, home, at seven P.M. Inside I mixed a weak drink, then settled on the oversized chocolate brown divan in the front room, winked at Amelia, the nude over my fake fireplace, and put in a call to Diane Borden.

"Hello-o?"

"Diane? Shell Scott. I want —"

"Ooooh, Scotty. How nice. You missed me. Really missed me."

"No. I want —"

"You didn't miss me? Scotty! Please!"

"O.K., I missed you. Now listen. Reserve two tables at the Ambassador tonight. The Grove, adjoining tables. If you need glasses, wear them —"

"I don't need glasses —"

"Keep quiet a minute. One table is for you; the other is for me and a gal. I'm hoping she'll be wearing some rocks. Maybe yes, maybe no, but just in case, I want you to be there to take a peek. If you see anything that looks like yours, just sit tight. I'll get the word from you; I'll table-hop or something. O.K.?"

"What are you talking about?"

I went through it again, more slowly and clearly, telling her to get the tables for nine-thirty, and she said, "Is she pretty?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

"Yeah, she's a beauty. What's that got to do with your bracelet and chokers and —" I broke it off. "Oh, hell, I forgot. Drink cokes or something till we get there."

"I'll drink anything I want."

"But you'll get in —"

"You dope. I'm twenty-one. I told you I was —"

"You're what!"

"Twenty-one. You can look it up if you want to, just like a detective. I was twenty-one six days ago. So there."

She hung up.

Well, I thought. Well, well.

It was nine sharp when I read the neat card, "Lois Sanders," and rang the buzzer. A gong went off inside, then she opened the door and a gong went off in my head. This time she was in a gown like deep-maroon skin, just the right size. The dress wasn't high on her throat like the green one; it was strapless, smooth, low on her high breasts, snug around her trim waist, gleaming over her curving hips, gracefully draped almost to the floor.

"Come in," she said. "You're right on time. And you know something? My headache is miraculously gone."

I stared at her. "You know something? *I* am miraculously gone. You look lovely, Lois." She held the door and I went inside.

"Thank you," she said. "You're rather pretty, too. You look right at home in a dinner jacket."

I'd showered and shaved and climbed into the old tux and black tie. If I'd had soup and fish I'd probably have worn the silly things. I wanted this to be "formal" enough so Lois would feel lost without some glittering jewelry. Funny thing, though, I was beginning to feel a little lousy about this deal.

Lois took both my hands in hers and backed across the room to a divan that faced a wide window.

"You sit there, Shell. Drink before we leave?"

"Swell."

"You'll have to take what I've got. But its not too bad."

She was still holding my hands, her back to the window and faint illumination behind her softly outlining the curve of her waist and hips. "Sounds delightful," I said, and tightened my hands on hers.

She slipped her fingers free and said, smiling, "I meant rum and coke."

"I was afraid you meant something like that."

I looked out the window until she came back with the drinks. We chatted about nothing in particular, pleasantly, so pleasantly that I didn't want it to end and decided I liked Lois perhaps a bit too well. It was nine-fifteen when we finished our drinks.

"Ready, Lois?"

"Uh-huh. I'll get my stole."

I followed her to the bedroom door. She picked what looked like a mink stole off the bed, draped it over her shoulders and walked back in front of me. She didn't have on a single diamond, ruby, bracelet or necklace. She wasn't even wearing a ring.

I opened my mouth to comment on that, and stopped. This wasn't at all clever or funny any more. But finally I said, "Here I am all decked out in studs and links and a hemannish after-shave lotion, and you haven't so much as a watch. I'll have to buy you some baubles."

It came out flat, toneless, and cruelly obvious. I had no way of knowing what Cannon might have said to her earlier in the Zephyr Room. Nor what he'd said yesterday when he gave her what I felt sure was Diane's bracelet. She could know Cannon had given her a stolen bracelet, she might even be in with him; she might suspect the thing was stolen, or she might even think it was a paste offering from a smitten suitor. And she might not even have it now, whether it was the one I was after or another one entirely — but I had to find out, and I was stuck now with the way I'd played it.

If Lois had wondered, during the evening or earlier, if I'd say anything about her wearing jewelry, she hadn't given any indication of it. She'd been sweet and happy and smiling, but now the half-smile went away from her face and something went out of her brown eyes.

"Maybe you're right, Shell," she said. "I suppose I should wear something."

She turned away from me and went to a dresser against the left wall, opened the second drawer and took out a square box. "Well, help me out," she said, not looking at me. "What should I wear?"

She opened the box and watched me as I walked over and looked down into it at the crystal-white stones, and the red ones, the bracelets and chains and pins.

And it was there. The bracelet with the snake's head, ruby-red eyes, and a forked gold tongue flicking out the of mouth. I picked it up.

"How about this?"

Right then, if it was all going to

come apart, was when it should have happened. But she went along with it, neither of us fooling the other. "All right," she said quietly.

I picked up a glistening choker, gems set into a thin black band. "This would be good."

"It's rhinestones. I bought it myself. Most of the others were given to me." She swallowed. "By men, of course."

I lifted her wrist. She'd already slipped the bracelet on and I asked, "More rhinestones?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." She hesitated. "Cannon gave it to me, Shell. I suppose you know that."

"I . . . I had a hunch, honey."

She was facing me, and she put the choker around her throat, her hands behind her neck to fasten it there. Her full breasts lifted and pressed against the edge of her dress. She said softly, "I don't know why I'm putting this on. I hope you didn't make reservations."

I winced. "Look, Lois. Let's get this straight. We might as well now. Cannon gave you the rocks. I think they're hot — stolen. O.K., there you've got it. I didn't know I was going to get into a screwed-up mess like this, but there it is. Now what about it? Anything you can tell me? Or should I keep on guessing?"

Her brown eyes were icy. "Cannon gave me this yesterday. I don't know where he got it or how — and up till now I didn't want to know. He's given me other things, but never anything so nice. He's been trying to . . . buy something from me, by giving me things, but he hasn't bought anything yet because it's not for sale. Or . . . maybe he has bought something." She paused, looking at me, her oval face sober, then added, "And I don't like you at all, Shell."

Neither of us said anything after that for a while, but finally I said, "I wonder whatever made me think I was a detective? Hey, what say we have another quick one, then take off for the high spots."

"You still want to go?" Her voice was dull.

"Sure."

We each had a short drink and some rather deadly and dragging conversation, then we left. She was awfully quiet going down in the elevator and I said, "Lois, honey, give me a grin. Let out a whoop or something. Come on, we'll have a big kick tonight, let down your hair."

She smiled slightly. "I suppose there's no sense wasting the evening."

"Of course not. We'll run around screeching, we'll get higher than rockets and yip at people. Baby, we'll dance in the streets —" The elevator stopped, so I stopped, but she shook her head at me and the smile was a little wider, a little brighter.

She looped her arm through mine and we went out onto Wilcox Street. I steered her toward the Cad, but just before we reached it I heard something scrape on the sidewalk

and Lois said, "Why Cannon! What —"

And then there was a grunt, and a great whistling and roaring and clanging of bells, and my last sad thought after that monstrous fist landed like an artillery shell alongside my head was: There'll be no dancing in the streets tonight.

I came to this time in my Cad, slumped behind the wheel. The first time this had happened, I had been more than a bit peeved at Cannon. But now I was seriously considering killing the son. I was so mad that it felt as if the top of my head were going to pop off and sail through the roof of the Cad like a flying saucer. It was five minutes before I calmed down enough to start thinking about anything except smashing my fists into Cannon's ugly face.

Then I got out of the car and went back to Lois' apartment. She wasn't there; at least there was no response to my ringing the buzzer and banging on the door. I checked the Zephyr Room but Lois had "gone home with a headache" and hadn't come back. No, neither Cannon nor his pals had been in. Yes, I did have a black eye, and would you like a couple? I left the Zephyr Room and went back to my apartment, still burning.

It was a little after ten. I looked up Lois Sanders in the phone book and called her half-dozen times, but each time the line was busy. Finally I flopped on the bed, still in my tux. The phone ringing woke me at midnight.

I woke up with everything still fresh in my mind, grabbed the phone and I suppose I snarled into it, "Yeah?"

"Scotty . . . Scotty, I'm plastered. Oh, woo, am I drunk. Scotty? That you, Scotty?"

I groaned. Diane. Oh, Lord, now Diane. I'd completely forgotten about her. I said, "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the Groove, Coc'nut Groove, an' you're not here, Scotty, you're not here."

She sounded moist. I said roughly, "For Pete's sake don't bust out bawling. I'll come down and get you."

"Will you? Will you, Scotty?"

"Yes, of course. Just hang on, I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

She said, "Goodie," and I hung up. Well, at least I was dressed for the Grove. Almost. I hadn't been wearing my gun up till now. I went into the bedroom, dug out the .38 Colt Special and shrugged out of my jacket, slipped on the gun and harness. With the jacket back on it bulged over the gun, but that was all right. Now I was dressed. If I saw Cannon, and he so much as sneered at me, I was going to aim at his right eye and pull the trigger. Then when he fell down I was going to aim at his left eye and pull the trigger. Then I was going to kick him in the head, real hard too.

In the bathroom I took a look at myself, and I looked terrible. The left side of my jaw was swollen considerably and my right eye was purple and almost closed. I could see out of it still; well enough to aim a .38, anyway. I headed back toward the front room and somebody outside pressed the buzzer. I opened the door and gawked at the guy in a gray suit and the cop in uniform.

"What's the matter?" I asked them. I know a lot of guys in the department, but these were strangers.

"You're Scott?"

"Yeah."

"Better come with us."

"Huh? What for? What is this?"

They were both medium height, both husky, one about twenty-five, the other in his forties. The older one was in plainclothes, the other in a patrolman's uniform.

The older guy showed me his shield and said, "Where'd you leave your Cad, Scott?"

"It's down in front. I parked it on the street, sure, so I get a ticket. I was pooped, and —"

He interrupted. "What happened to your face? You have an accident?"

"I was in a fight. I guess it was a fight. This some new kind of traffic citation?"

"No ticket, Scott. Hit and run. You didn't leave your car on the street. Not this street."

"What?" It hadn't even penetrated.

He smelled my breath. "Drunk? All sharped up, too. You usually have fights in those clothes?" His voice hardened. "Come on with us, Scott. We want you to look at somebody. In the morgue."

We were in the prowl car and headed toward downtown L.A. before it hit me. Oh, my God, I thought. Not . . . not Lois.

They took me downstairs in the Hall of Justice and back into the morgue. The body was covered with the usual cloth and they stood me alongside the table and peeled the cloth back.

The plainclothesman said, "Well? You know who it is?"

I felt sick. I said, "I've told you twenty times you've got the wrong guy. I didn't do it." I looked at the battered corpse again. "But I know who it is. His name was Joseph Raspberry."

The next few hours were long ones, and lousy ones. It seemed that I answered a thousand questions a thousand times each, but finally the pressure eased off a little. About twenty of the cops I know in the department, all friends of mine, came around and they were on my side as much as they could be. Even Phil Samson, the Captain of Homicide and my best friend in L.A., climbed out of bed and roared down when word reached him. He threw his substantial weight about the place for half an hour; and I about half convinced the cops that I wouldn't slam into a guy with my car, then

leave the car out where it could be spotted.

The police story was simple enough once I got it. Calls concerning both the body lying at the side of a darkened road and the black Cadillac coupe convertible parked a mile away had come in at almost the same time, close to eleven-thirty P.M. The Cad's right front fender was caved in, with blood and bits of hair on it. My name, of course, was on the Cad's registration slip. The cops had looked into the trunk, too, where I keep all kinds of gadgets useful in my work, ranging from loaded grenades to an infra-red optophone, and not knowing me they'd figured I was either a master criminal or a mad scientist about to blow up the city. But that was all squared away when Samson and some of the other cops came around at Headquarters.

My story was simple enough, too: I told them exactly what I'd done all evening, except that I didn't mention the fact that Joe had given me the tip that set me off — I had a reason — and I didn't mention Cannon's name, just told them I didn't see who had slugged me and I figured it was a jealous suitor, which was true. My car obviously had been stolen and used to rub out Joe, apparently, I said, by somebody who wanted to give me trouble, and had.

It was long and wearisome, and the only break was when, at one-thirty in the morning, I sprang out of my chair and almost to the ceiling yelling "Jesus, Diane!" It had come to me in a flash that she was probably lying under the table by now, her eyes glassy. Samson was ready to leave then, so he said he'd pick her up and see that she got home and — ha, ha — tell her I was in jail.

The upshot of it all was that I got mugged and printed, but out on bail shortly after eight A.M. Before nine I was back in my office without the thousand-dollar bill in my kick, all the morning papers spread on the desk before me, and the gripe, the anger, the fury in me feeding on itself and growing big enough to fill all Los Angeles and a substantial part of the Universe.

I had a good deal of information now, facts which satisfied me but wouldn't last two seconds in court, even though one fact led to another and another right up to the valid conclusion. Naturally the boy I wanted was Cannon. But I had to tie him up so tight he'd never wriggle out. And I had to do it my way, do it myself, and do it fast. And for several reasons.

If I didn't, I was probably through as a private investigator, at least in L.A. I've mentioned that a detective wouldn't last six months without his informants and stools. The guys in and around the rackets would know by now that Joe had tipped me, and that Joe had been given the canary treatment. I knew that right now in the "underworld" of Los Angeles, the word was spread-

ing, the rumble was going from bar to backroom to poker game to horse parlor: "They got Scott's canary." And the unspoken question would be, what was I going to do about it.

One of the things demanded of the guy tipped, is that he protect or cover for the tipster; canaries stop singing when it isn't profitable. If I sat still, most of my tips and leaks would slow and eventually stop. I could have told the cops what I thought and let them pick up Cannon and his chums, question them, and with nothing solid against them let them go — whereupon Cannon would sit back and laugh at me, and so would the rest of the hoods and hooligans. No, I had to get him myself, and get him good.

There was more reason, too. I looked at the newspapers on my desk. Only one of them had the story headlined, but all of them had something about it on the front page. The stories merely said I was being questioned — I'd still been in the can when the reporters got the word — but they all had my name spelled correctly. Too many people would automatically figure me for the hit and run, even though my friends would know better. Most newspaper readers never see the "alleged" and "authoritative source" and "suspicion of." They take the conjectures as facts and you're hung on the newspaper's banner. I was. A year from now a lot of people hearing the name Shell Scott would say, "Yeah, he run over that little guy."

My office phone rang and I grabbed it, feeling like biting off the mouthpiece. It was Jules Osborne.

"Mr. Scott? What's happened? Have you seen the papers? Diane phoned me last night, she was drunk, it was terrible. And I don't know what — this is —"

"Don't get giddy. And yeah, I've seen the papers. What the hell do you want?"

"Why, I . . . " he sputtered a little. "Naturally I was concerned. "I . . ."

"Look, Mr. Osborne. I've had a trying night. I know what I'm doing, and I'm getting close to what you want. Just relax for a while and read the papers."

I listened to him chatter for a bit, then I said, "No, I didn't mention you to the cops — I won't. Nobody knows a thing. And I won't put a word on paper, no reports or anything."

"But Diane — she's all upset. What —"

"I'll talk to Diane. I'll chew her ear off. She won't bother you. Goodbye." I hung up. I just didn't feel easy going.

And I was pooped. I'd had only about an hour and a half of sleep — not including the two short periods at the Zephyr Room and behind the wheel of my Cad, which didn't count. My jaw hurt, my right eye was damn near closed, and I was wandering around in broad daylight in that stupid tuxedo. My Cad

was being gone over by the lab boys and I wouldn't get it back till this afternoon, so I left the office, flagged a cab, and told the driver to take me out to Hollywood and the Spartan Apartment Hotel.

Diane's house wasn't out of the way, so I had the driver wait while I went to her door and rang. It took her so long to get to the door and open it that I'd almost decided she wasn't home. But finally dragging feet came unsteadily through the front room, the door opened, and a strand of red hair and one bloodshot blue eye peered out at me. There were no glad cries this morning.

"Oh," she said. "You."

"Me. I dropped by to tell you I'm sorry about last night."

"*You're* sorry!"

"Samson pick you up?"

"That old man?"

"He's not so old."

"That's what you think."

What I thought was that Samson, a happily married man who never looked at another woman unless she was about to be booked, must have had one hell of a time with this little tomato. But I said, "And I wanted to ask you to lay off Osborne. Every time you yak at him he yaks at me and I've got no time for yakking. I'll get your pretties back."

"Oh, foo," she said, then told me without humor what I could do with her pretties. She wasn't very gay this morning, either. I left.

After a shower and change to a gabardine suit, complete with gun and holster, I phoned Lois at her apartment. No answer. I went back into downtown L.A., into the back rooms again, the smelly bars, and the horse parlors. I hit hotels and rooming houses, and I spent six hours and four hundred dollars, and sometimes I was a little brutal, but I was in a hurry. I got what I was after. Like the dope from Slip Kelly, for one thing.

I found Slip shooting pool in a dump on the wrong side of Main Street. I took him back into the men's room, shut the door and leaned against it.

"Slip, I guess you heard about Joe."

"Joe Raspberry?"

"Come off it. You know what Joe."

He licked his lips. "Yeah. It . . . was in the papers."

"Sure. So now you tell me every goddamn thing you know about Cannon and Tinkle and Artie Payne."

"Huh? I don't know nothin' —"

I didn't lay a hand on him, but I said, "Shut up, I know you do. You practically grew up with Tinkle and you did a bit at Quentin with Artie. Listen steady, Slip. Big Foster's back in town. He knows I puked on him at the trial, but he doesn't know who belched to me. He'd sure like to know."

It didn't take him long to figure that one out. He frowned and said, "You couldn't do nothin' like that."

"I could, Slip. And I would. The squeeze is on. I'm in a spot, man. I'm a little mad about Joe, too. And nobody would ever know I finked on you except you and me. And Foster. And then just me and Foster."

He told me what I wanted to know.

Dazzy Brown was a knocked-out, easy going colored boy who played trumpet so sweet it made Harry James sound like a man with a kazoo, and Dazzy inhaled marijuana smoke as if it were oxygen. He'd been in stir for stealing eight saxophones and a trombone, so he knew what stir was like, and I sidled up to him at a West-side bar, threw a friendly arm around his shoulders, planted my chops three inches from his and said softly, "Listen, Cat, I just learned you grow that gage in flower pots, so come along with me, boy, you're going to the house of many slammers where they don't play no blues," and it was remarkable the way he cooperated.

Then there was Hooko Carter, the long-nosed grifter with a heroin habit, who had never given me the time of day before this, but who was going to give me all twenty-four hours very soon now. I got him out of bed in his rooming house, and he didn't have anything to say either. At first. So I told him:

"Hooko, you're my pal, I want you to know that. You're also Artie Payne's pal; and there's a rumble you and Cannon used to be closer than Siamese twins. Something else I know: it costs you forty skins a day for reindeer dust, and you need that steady supply. You get it from Beetle, but you don't know where he gets it. I do, but I don't have enough on the guy to put him away — just enough so he wouldn't like antagonizing me. He'd be glad to do me a favor. What's it like when you can't get your dynamite, pal?"

So I got a little more from Hooko. By four o'clock in the afternoon I'd made a few more enemies, and one gunsel had spit through his teeth at me, and maybe he'd do it again, but he sure wouldn't do it through teeth. I'd been a real rip-roaring wildcat, all right, and a lot of the things I did I wouldn't have done on an ordinary day, but this was no ordinary day — and I'd got what I wanted, even more than I'd expected.

And one thing was sure: There was a new rumble in the back rooms and bars and hangouts now, the grapevine was twitching and hoodlums and hipsters were bending ears all over town. The question now wouldn't be: What's Scott going to do about it, but Who's gonna get killed? The canaries would feel a little better, and keep on singing, but I wondered what Cannon and Tinkle and Artie would be thinking now. Because they'd be on the grapevine too; they'd know I was throwing a lot of weight around, leaning on them, even though they wouldn't know for sure what I'd learned or what I was going to do

next. But Cannon would know by now that I figured on killing him.

I'd found out for damn sure what I'd already been sure of, that Cannon and Tinkle and Artie were the boys who'd been pulling the ten-to-two jobs — and most important of all I learned there was a job set up for tonight. If the job went through, there'd be four of us in on it; if it didn't, I'd try another way. From bits and pieces I'd made my plan. From Hooko I found out, among a lot of unimportant things, that Artie Payne was called the "Professor" because he had such a valuable think-pot, and because he'd been librarian at Folsom for three years; from Slip I learned the Professor had worked in the Westinghouse labs from the time he was twenty-six till he was thirty-four, and he'd naturally learned a lot about lighting, all kinds of lighting and lights. I already knew Tinkle, the Cowboy, had been a locksmith. And I figured, from personal experience, that Cannon could break a man's neck with one blow of his big fist if he hit him squarely with his three-hundred pounds behind it. It was adding up, fitting together.

At two-thirty in the afternoon I put in a third phone call to Lois. I'd called her a second time at one, but there hadn't been any answer then either. So I hadn't seen or talked to her since that sad moment when she'd said, "Why, Cannon. What —" and I'd heard Cannon grunt as he started to swing. But I'd done a lot of wondering. I'd just about rejected any idea that she was "in" with Cannon on any of his capers — it was hardly likely she'd have showed me the hot rocks he'd handed her if she were — but whether she'd known the stones were stolen or not I didn't know. I kind of leaned toward the idea that what she'd told me last night was true: that she hadn't known and hadn't wanted to know; the implication being that the snake-eyed hoop was a damned handsome chunk of sparkles, and she hoped it was clean. And the word I'd got from the boys around town was that Lois was simply a solid tomato, on the up and up, whom Cannon was hot for. I liked it that way, because I'd begun getting somewhat steamed up about Lois myself — and I was more than a little worried about her. I thought again about how I'd felt starting for the morgue last night.

Then she answered the phone.

"Lois? Uh, Shell Scott here."

"Oh . . . hello, Shell."

"You all right?"

"Yes. How about you? I saw the papers."

"That was a frame. I'm O.K., a little stooped over, but on my feet. What happened to you after I — after I left?"

Her story was that she'd gawked at Cannon while he dumped me into my Cad, then tried to slap his eyeballs out, at least so she said, then they'd had a word battle during which she'd called him all kinds of

names. After a minute or two of this, they'd finally gone back into her apartment — were there when I'd banged on the door, Cannon ready to clobber her if she'd peeped — and after my departure the fireworks continued.

She went on, "It lasted about an hour, but when he left, I told him not to come back."

"I called you last night but your line was busy. What —"

"Even after Cannon left, he phoned me a couple times. He was so persistent, I took the phone off its hook and went to bed."

I was quiet for a minute, then, "Honey, I guess you haven't changed your opinion of me. Or, have you?"

"When I found out you were a detective I wondered if you wanted to take me out because you . . . let's say, just couldn't resist me, or if you had a detective's reason. So naturally I was a little disappointed last night. But then I realized you were right; I knew the kind of man Cannon was, but I took the things he gave me anyway. I feel better now, though; as long as I thought he might have bought those things for me I could enjoy them. But when I *knew* he probably stole them, naturally I gave them back."

"You what?"

"I gave them back to him. Last night."

"You what?"

"Well . . . he suggested it, and I was afraid not to. And I didn't want them any more, anyway."

I ground my teeth together. Right now I wasn't nearly as interested in the jewelry itself as I was in getting the guys who had lifted it, but I should at least have wrapped up that bracelet last night. I was even starting to wonder what could have made me so stupid as to leave the thing loose, when I remembered it was Cannon who'd made me so stupid. It was just another reason to hate him, and maybe before long it wouldn't make any difference.

I said, "Honey, listen. You shooed Cannon out last night, but do you think he'd jump at the chance to come back? If he has any sense he would."

"This might sound egotistical, but I'm sure he would. He was practically on his knees when he left. But —"

"What would you say if I asked you to get in touch with him, tell him you're sorry, that you'd like to see him tonight?"

It took her a while to answer that one, but she said, "All right, Shell. You're a very strange and thorough detective, aren't you?"

The same tone was in her voice now that had been there when I'd asked her last night to wear the bracelet. I started to explain everything, then made myself shut up. It wouldn't be any good that way. And I wondered for a moment if she could possibly be conning me. I said, "You'll do it then?"

"When am I supposed to see him and where are we going?"

"Never mind where you're going. But you want to see him around ten."

"All right. Goodbye."

"Hey, I called earlier this morning but couldn't get you. What —"

"Believe it or not, I was buying some rhinestones."

She hung up. I hung up. By four-fifteen I'd finished all the checking in town I was going to do. It was quite a trio I'd been checking on: The Professor was the brain, the Cowboy was the Houdini, and the Cannon was the muscle and boss. From Hooko, who had long known Cannon well, I'd learned that he should have been called No-Cannon Cannon, because he never carried a gun; Artie and Cowboy Tinkle always kept their arms warm with heaters. I had talked to a man named Sylvester Johnson, who lived next door to the attorney who'd been killed, beaten and shot during a burglary. Sylvester's story, condensed: "Yes, sir, that night we were sitting out back by the barbecue pit, drinking beer. No, we didn't see or hear anything till Mr. Drake came home. He parked his car and went inside. About a minute after he turned on the lights we heard a shot. Called the police. No, didn't see anybody leave. Glad to help."

I'd checked the dates of all nine reported robberies — and Diane's — against weather-bureau records. They'd all been pulled off on moonless or overcast nights. All between, roughly, ten and two. If people were going to be out, they'd be gone by ten; and often they were home shortly after the bars closed. A heavy fog was predicted for tonight.

It was solid enough. I called Homicide and got Samson on the phone. After the helloes I said, "Sam, I'm coming down to get my Caddy in half an hour — boys said it would be ready. You're buddies with Turner in Scientific Investigation. How about having his infra-red flashlight, and the red-lensed goggles that go with it, in the back of my Cad along with all my junk?"

"What? Why in blue hell do you want that stuff?"

"I, uh, lost something in a dark cellar. I want to go look for it. I'd be awful happy if you didn't ask me any more."

"Goddammit, Shell, have you got something we need?"

"Nothing that's any good to anybody but me. And not a thing that's worth a damn as evidence — yet. That's straight, Sam. But go along with me and maybe there will be."

"I'd like to, Shell, but . . ."

"And, Sam, you saw the papers. Can't be helped, but I'd sure like some more stories in them tomorrow or the next day. A story that would rub out the smell before it sinks too far in. And besides, you don't know what I want the stuff for. Maybe I'm going out to Lover's Lane and spy on the high-school kids."

"Shell Scott shot in the head would make a nice story. And what the hell am I going to tell Turner?

Well . . ." He was quiet for a few seconds. "I ought to put you in jail for sending me out to get that crazy woman last night."

"Was she trouble?"

"When I got to the Grove she was singing. Into the bloody microphone. I like to never got her out of there. And when I did — let me tell you."

I got my first good laugh of the day from his story. Then he said, "Well, hell, look in your trunk when you get down here. I can't promise anything."

"Thanks, Sam. See you."

There was no trouble getting the Cad, and Sam had left what I wanted in the trunk. The goggles looked much like red-lensed glasses, but the light was a big sonovagun, well over a foot wide and long, perhaps four inches thick, with a curved metal handle on its top. I put them both in the front seat and drove to Eighth Street, parked before Porter's Radio Shop and went inside. This was my second trip today; I'd been here about noon. Porter, a young studious-looking ex-G.I. came out.

"Hi, Shell. I just finished it up. That's fifty bucks."

"A hell of a price for one vacuum tube and a dry-cell battery in a beat-up cigar box."

He grinned. "You're paying, my friend, for my genius and brilliant know-how."

"I'd have made it myself if I'd had the time."

He sneered, then went into the back room and came out with the "squawk box" I'd ordered. He sat it on the counter beside the compact radio receiver complete with loop antenna. I gave Porter his fifty bucks and he frowned. "You know, I ought to have a deposit on that receiver," he said. "Only one I got with a loop."

"I'll bring it back tomorr —" I stopped. "Maybe I'd better leave a deposit at that."

I gave him some more money, then used his phone to call Lois again. She answered right away.

"Shell, honey. Well?"

"He . . . I guess I overestimated myself. He — well, he couldn't make it. He was awfully apologetic, but he said he'd see me tomorrow instead."

I laughed. I felt like a million. "Baby," I said. "He won't see you tomorrow — or the next day, or the next."

"Shell, I've been just sitting here for almost an hour, thinking a lot. You knew he wouldn't see me tonight didn't you?"

"I knew he wouldn't because if he tried I was going to clobber him with a tire iron. But I did have a hunch he wouldn't try."

"Shell! Darn you, can't you let a girl in on anything?"

"I'll tell you the truth, Sweetheart. I wasn't sure I could trust you."

"You sure now?"

"No. But sure enough."

"Shell, darn you — *damn* you!"

"Still friends?"

"Oh, I suppose . . . " Then her voice dropped lower, softened, got like champagne again, and I remembered her at the dice table in her creme-de-menthe gown, the way she'd looked when I'd asked her what she wore with champagne. She said, "No . . . I don't think you and I can be friends." The "friends" was slightly accented. She went on, "Shell, it seems that every time I talk to you or see you, I learn more about you."

It seemed time to try pressing my luck again. "How much would you like to learn?"

A soft chuckle was her answer. Then, "Will I see you? Later maybe?"

I thought about that. "With any luck, honey, I'll see you later."

"Promise?"

"Sure, honey."

We hung up. I lugged the squawk box and receiver out to my Cad and sat it on the front seat alongside the flash and goggles I'd got from Sam. I was ready to go.

I drove to Artie Payne's first. During the afternoon I'd learned where The Professor and the other two lived, and where Professor Payne kept his '50 Chrysler — which was used on the trio's jobs. It was dark when I reached his place, and it took me only a couple minutes to tape the small squeal box to his car's rear axle. I brushed off my clothes and drove three miles to Cannon's hotel on National Boulevard, went four blocks past it, made a U turn and parked, lit a cigarette and waited. The big light, red glasses, and radio receiver were on the seat beside me.

If the boys went ahead with their planned caper tonight, I knew Artie would pick up Tinkle and Cannon and they'd go from here to whatever spot they'd cased — and I couldn't think of anything else which would keep Cannon away from a repentant Lois. But they'd know what I'd been doing today, and they'd be even more jumpy than usual. A close tail was out; damn near any kind of tail was out. If they didn't find that squawk box, though, there was one tail that could work. The little cigar box on the axle of Miller's car was no more than a small and simple radio sending set which would put out a steady howl that I could pick up on the receiver beside me, locating the car's direction from me with the loop antenna.

I waited. The moon was barely past the crescent stage tonight, and it was cold. Fog had just started to drift in from the beaches a few miles away, mixing with the smog, dimming the street lights around me. I waited, smoking one cigarette after another.

I was wondering if the boys had been scared off, when I picked up a squeal while I was turning the loop antenna. It was eleven o'clock and The Professor was on his way.

The howl got louder in the radio receiver and I started the Cad's motor. In a minute I saw the fog-dimmed headlights of a car pull into the curb and stop four blocks away. At Cannon's Hotel. Two minutes later by my watch the car started up again and took a right at the corner. Immediately the howl in my radio receiver stopped. I threw my old cigarette away and lit another.

They wouldn't take a chance on a ticket the night of a job, so I estimated their top speed at thirty and gave them a full minute, then put the Cad in gear and swung left off National Boulevard at Sepulveda, where they'd turned. I figured they shouldn't be more than half a mile ahead of me. I pointed the loop antenna ahead, but there wasn't any squeal so I turned it around ninety degrees and kept going straight down Sepulveda, past Rose Avenue and Ocean Park Avenue and Charnock Road, and there wasn't a peep out of the radio. But at Venice Boulevard the howl came in strong and I swung left; it stayed steady so I knew they weren't going in the opposite direction. I gave the Cad more gas, closed the distance between us.

From there it was easy enough. They made only two more turns, a left at Cochran and a right at Twelfth. On Twelfth they stopped, and eight blocks after I made the last turn, I passed Artie's car, parked. Now it was going to start getting a little precarious.

I knew they wouldn't park in front of the house they'd cased, and maybe not even on the same street, but they wouldn't work too far from the car, and I at least knew where the Chrysler was. I could get them there if it came to that, but I wanted to catch them cold, right on the job. Right here was where I found out if I'd figured how they worked correctly; I didn't know for sure, but it was more than a hunch. I put on the red-lensed glasses and drove slowly ahead looking at the houses on both sides of the street. Nothing. After four blocks I went right a block then and headed back. There on Dockweiler Street, less than two blocks from where their car was parked, I passed a big two-story Georgian-type mansion dark except for a faint light showing at one upstairs window. When I took the goggles off, the house was completely dark; not a glimmer of illumination came from any part of the house. But with the glasses on again, the light was there. I'd found them.

I parked around the corner and cut the headlights and motor. Even now that I'd found them, it still seemed like magic to me. I'd worked with infra-red light before; I knew that New York Harbor boats were equipped with infra-red spotlights and binoculars, and that Army snipers picked off the enemy outlined in infra-red from scopes mounted on their rifles — but it still seemed like a trick of Merlin.

I knew my gun was ready, but I took it out of the holster and checked it again anyway, then slipped it back. My heartbeat speeded up involuntarily; my throat dried; I could feel a slight, cold shiver brush over my skin. I picked up the heavy light, shoved the goggles up on my forehead and got out of the car. Fog was damp against my face.

Near the house I slipped the glasses down over my eyes again and saw the light still visible above. I was damned careful getting to the house and walking to its front, my body pressed against the wall, but I made it without trouble to the front door. I switched the light on and in its glow I could see the door was slightly cracked. Tinkle, the ex-locksmith, wouldn't lock it again till they left; there was always a chance the boys might want to leave in a hurry. The boys were pretty positive about this job. They didn't bother to leave a lookout. I loved them for it.

Before I went through the door I slid out the .38 and held it in my right hand, the burning flash in my left. I went inside, swung the flash around till I spotted a stairway leading above, then started walking up it. I couldn't see as well as I'd have liked, but I wouldn't bump into any chairs or walls — and Cannon, Artie, and Tinkle, working in infra-red above me, wouldn't be able to see any better. For a moment I thought of the attorney these bastards had killed, wondered if he'd walked into a darkened room, unable to see a thing, while the three men above me now could watch his every movement, see to beat him, to kill him.

I followed a hall at the head of the stairs till I could see a glow from the room in which I knew they were, then I turned off my light. If I could see their light, they could also see mine. The door was ajar. I heard their soft movements, but I couldn't yet see them. I kept moving forward, slowly, my hand sweaty and slippery on the butt of my .38.

A yard from the door I pulled the Colt's hammer back on full cock and took the last step, spotted them inside the room, and then I moved through the doorway. For that first second none of them saw me. Cannon stood at the window, his back toward me; Artie was at a safe in the right wall, Tinkle holding a bulky light similar to mine, bathing Artie and the safe in infra-red light.

My heart had suddenly started racing and I could feel the blood tingling clear down in the tips of my fingers. It was as though the blood were hot inside me, warming my skin, my entire body. I could feel perspiration on my face and chest, in my armpits. I tightened my finger on the Colt's trigger and snapped on the beam of my flash just as Artie glanced over his shoulder, eyes behind the goggles like round black holes in a skull's head, and spotted me.

I saw his mouth open and I shouted, "Freeze, you sons, don't —" but that was all I had time for because a lot of hell broke loose in that instant. Artie yelled at the top of his lungs and leaped to the side as Tinkle spun around and the light he'd held thudded to the carpet, still burning. Cannon's huge bulk dropped to the floor. I flipped my gun over at Cannon, rolling now toward the wall, but flame jumped at me from Tinkle's hand and the room exploded with sound. I dropped to one knee, snapped a shot at Tinkle as I saw his gun leveling at me; I pulled the trigger once more and saw him stagger, but his gun boomed again and I felt the slap of a bullet against my left hand; the impact of that heavy slug spun me halfway around, the light tumbling to the floor and going out. I went down on both knees, forcing my gun hand back toward Tinkle, twisting my body and snapping a wild shot at him, then getting the gun barrel centered on his chest and firing twice so fast the shots blurred into one sound.

He started falling as I saw Artie's hand digging under his coat, coming out with a snub-nosed revolver, but Artie never got the gun an inch away from his chest because I shot him in the head. Dimly I saw his body go limp, but like a crazy man I fired at him again, and heard the hammer fall on an empty cartridge. It was suddenly dark, but I triggered the gun still again, not even realizing the chambers were empty, not comprehending the darkness. I was like a man in a trance, sweat drenching my body and the taste of blood on my lips where I'd bitten them, the smell of cordite in my nostrils, and the drumming of blood in my brain.

I was still on my knees, body twisted, pain obvious in my left hand now, and the quiet, the stillness seemed slowly to become like a pressure against my eardrums, and the darkness, a solid black, was like a wall around me. I got my feet under me, stood up. Cannon wouldn't have a gun; Cannon —

My hand touched the light switch. I slid the glasses up off my eyes, looked toward the spot where the two men lay on the floor, flipped on the light. I was staring to my right as brilliant light blazed in the room and looking there was what damn near got me killed.

It was the grunt that saved me, the fact that Cannon always grunted before he swung that roundhouse cannonball of his, and when I heard the sound close by me on my left I didn't even stop to turn my head. I just let my knees go slack, dropping my body and turning as I fell, then tensed the muscles in my legs and let them start springing me up again as an arm that looked two yards long whistled over my skull.

And I guess Cannon must have been surprised, because always before when he'd swung at me it had been so very simple to hit my head,

and he was all splayed out in the air with his thick belly floating where I wanted it.

I just kept on going up, my right fist already balled and traveling in the right direction, and I let it go and felt it smash into his belly, heard the breath spurt from his mouth. I swung a little farther around, then pivoted, cocking my left fist and launching it at him. I knew I had him. He was bent over gasping, the whole side of his long bony face bare and unprotected.

My left clipped his chin, the pain almost killing me, and he spun halfway around, dropping to one knee. He was down a long way less than my size now, and I took half a step toward him, my right hand stretching for the ceiling, and when I slammed its edge down on the base of his skull it was easy for me to kick him in the face when he hit the floor and rolled over on his back. So I kicked him in the face. His jaw jerked far to the side, as if his face were made of rubber, then sagged and hung at an angle that was not normal at all.

I just stood there and looked at them all for a long minute. I noticed that Tinkle's oddly humped body was sprawled over the light he'd been holding, blotting out its beam, and I noticed that all of the men were dressed entirely in black; but it didn't mean anything to me. I could have noticed that they had purple horns growing out of their heads and it wouldn't have meant anything to me. I wasn't in very good shape at the moment. That was all right. The rest of these guys were in terrible condition.

Finally it occurred to me that there must be a phone around here somewhere. I started looking.

It was four o'clock in the morning before I'd passed through Homicide, Burglary, and Scientific Investigation. I was standing on the Main Street steps of City Hall, blinking as a final flash bulb went off in my face. One of the reporters — Bruce Ladd of the *Examiner* — said, "Infra-red, huh? Make quite a story. That was Payne's contribution?"

"Yeah," I said wearily. "That part was The Professor's idea; Cannon was top man, the muscle; Tinkle cased the spots and unlocked and locked the doors."

"How about that Tinkle?" another asked. "He gonna croak?"

"Slugs in his chest and stomach, but they think he'll live. He might as well croak; Cannon broke that attorney's neck, but Drake hadn't kicked off when Tinkle's bullet killed him."

"The loot?"

"Got most of it. They were holding most of the rocks till they cooled, but that part got rumbled tonight along with the rest of it. You'll have to see Captain Masterson to find out what stuff his boys picked up."

There were a few more questions from the reporters. I answered them,

practically swaying on my feet. It seemed that I hadn't slept for a month. But I could sleep now; Cannon had been willing to tell the whole story, but if he moved his jaw a half inch there was a chance it would fall off, so he wrote it all down. That was nice, because it gave the boys upstairs a handwritten confession — including the fact that Cannon had rounded up Tinkle and Artie last night, after he'd left Lois and before they stole my Cad, then picked up little Joe and worked him over before their "hit-and-run" finished him.

The reporters finally had all they needed. I knew most of them, nice enough guys. The other stories about me had simply been part of their jobs, just as this tonight had been part of mine. And when one of them finally said, "Anything to add, Scott?" I nodded.

"Yeah, boys. One thing. Be sure you make it clear about Joseph Raspberry." Then they took off. They knew what I meant; they'd take care of it.

My hand was bandaged, and though I damn near lost a thumb, I'd keep the thumb, the hand, and a fat scar. All I needed was three days sleep. And I wanted everything cleared up before I hit the sack, because I was going to lock the door and jerk the phone out of the wall. So I found a phone and called Diane, to get the whole thing wrapped up and off my mind.

Her voice was sleepy. "'Lo?"

"Diane? Shell — Scotty, to you."

"O-oh, Scotty. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. You'll get your stuff back; just wanted to let you know. It all got settled tonight."

"You darling, I knew you'd get my pretties. Are you going to bring them to me?"

Her voice didn't sound sleepy any more. Funny thing, I didn't feel quite so sleepy myself. I said, "Well . . . I don't know. Cops'll have them for a while."

"You bring them to me. I want you to."

"I suppose."

"Scotty. Are you going to sneak in like they did, and put them on my dresser?"

For a moment I thought fiendishly that maybe I should do just that: clap on my glasses, click on my monstrous red flashlight and tiptoe into her bedroom crying "Where are you-ou? Diane, where are you?" eyeballing her frantically all the while. But I said, "We'll — we'll see. But the stuff will be tied up for a while."

"Well, when it gets untied, you just bring it right out here to me."

"O.K. Good night, Diane. Let Osborne know about it. He owes me some money."

"I will. 'Bye, Daddy."

I was clear back in the Cad and rolling down Sunset before I realized what she'd called me, but I kept the car under control. That made me think about Lois. I figured she'd be

in bed, too, but probably I should call her. She might be worried — and anyway, I knew now she'd never conned me, had gone along with me all the way. I pulled into a gas station and gave her a ring. She answered in five seconds.

"Hi," I said. After a little chatter I gave her a fast rundown on the night's developments then said, "I didn't know if you'd still be up."

"I've been awake all night. Waiting for you to call. You said you'd see me." I started to tell her that I was falling asleep in the booth, but she said, "You promised, you know. Can't you come up for one little drink?"

"I'm pretty beat —"

"I thought you'd want to come up for a nightcap, at least, so I bought us something lovely. Can't you come up for just one little drink?"

"You and your drinks," I said. "What color is it this time?"

She didn't answer.

I could feel my jaw slowly sagging as a pleasantly staggering thought struck me. I said, "Honey, Lois, uh, sweetie . . . uh . . ."

She said softly, "I went to so much trouble, bought us something and put it in the refrigerator —"

"In the refrigerator?"

"— and I've been sitting here so long in this chilly old room —"

"Chilly?"

"— and I'm so lonesome . . . and cold . . . and —"

I said, "Baby, loosen up. What the hell have you got in that refrigerator?"

"Champagne. A whole magnum of champagne."

Man, let me tell you. I was *wide* awake. "Baby," I said, "unlock the door and stand aside," then I hung up and trotted for the Cad. What the hell, I was thinking. One little drink never hurt anybody. Anyway not too much.

She asked me if I loved her. Sure I did, I told her. I loved her to death. . .

One Down

BY

HUNT COLLINS

She leaned back against the cushions of the bed, and there was that lazy, contented smile on her face as she took a drag on her cigarette. The smoke spiraled around her face, and she closed her eyes sleepily. I remembered how I had once liked that sleepy look of hers. I did not like it now.

"It's good when you're home, Ben," she said.

"Uh-huh," I murmured. I took a cigarette from the box on the night table, lighted it, and blew out a stream of smoke.

"Yes, yes, it's really good." She drew in on her cigarette, and I watched the heave of her breasts, somehow no longer terribly interested.

"I hate your job," she said suddenly.

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said, pouting. "It's like a . . . a wall between us. When you're gone, I sit here and just curse your job and pray that you'll be home again soon. I hate it, Ben. I really do."

"Well," I said drily, "you have to eat, you know."

"Couldn't you get another job?" she asked. It was only about the hundredth time she'd asked that same question.

"I suppose," I said wearily.

"Then why don't you?" She sat up suddenly. "Why don't you, Ben?"

"I like traveling," I said. I was so tired of this, so damned tired of the same thing every time I was here. All I could think of now was what I had to do. I wanted to do it and get it over with.

She grinned coyly. "Do you miss me when you're on the road?"

"Sure," I said.

She cupped her hands behind my neck and trailed her lips across my jaw line. I felt nothing.

"Very much?"

She kissed my ear, shivered a little, and came closer to me.

"Yes, I miss you very much," I said.

She drew away from me suddenly. "Do you like the house, Ben? I did just what you said. I moved out of the apartment as soon as I got your letter. You should have told me sooner, Ben. I had no idea you didn't like the city."

"The neighbors were too snoopy," I said. "This is better. Out in the country like this."

"But it's so lonely. I've been here a week already, and I don't know a soul yet." She giggled. "There's hardly a soul *to* know."

"Good," I said.

"Good?" Her face grew puzzled. "What do you mean, Ben?"

"Adele," I told her, "you talk too goddamn much." I pulled her face to mine and clamped my mouth onto hers, just to shut her up. She brought her arms up around my neck immediately, tightening them there, bringing her body close to mine. I tried to move her away from me gently, but my arms were full of her, and her lips were moist and eager. Her eyes closed tightly, and I sighed inwardly and listened to the lonely chirp of the crickets outside the window.

"Do you love me?" she asked later.

"Yes."

"Really, Ben? Really and truly?"

"Really and truly."

"How much do you love me?"

"A whole lot, Adele. Heaps."

"But do you . . . where are you going, Ben?"

"Something I want to get from my jacket."

"Oh, all right." She stopped talking, thinking for a moment. "Ben, if you had to do it all over again, would you marry me? Would you still choose me as your wife?"

"Of course." I walked to the closet and opened the door. I knew just where I'd left it. In the right-hand jacket pocket.

"What is it you're getting, Ben? A present?" She sat up against the pillows again. "Is it a present for me?"

"In a way," I said. I closed my fist around it and turned abruptly. Her eyes opened wide.

"Ben! A gun. What . . . what are you doing with a gun?"

I didn't answer. I grinned, and

she saw something in my eyes, and her mouth went slack.

"Ben, no!" she said.

"Yes, Adele."

"Ben, I'm your wife. Ben, you're joking. Tell me you're joking."

"No, Adele, I'm quite serious."

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, the covers snatching at the thin material of her gown, pulling it up over her thighs.

"Ben, why? Why are you . . . Ben, please. Please!"

She was cringing against the wall now, her eyes saucered with fear.

I raised the gun.

"Ben!"

I fired twice, and both bullets caught her over her heart. I watched the blood appear on the front of her gown, like red mud slung at a clean, white wall. She toppled forward suddenly, her eyes blank. I put the gun away, dressed, and packed my suitcase.

I opened the screen door and walked into the kitchen. There was the smell of meat and potatoes frying, a smell I had come to dislike intensely. The radio was blaring, the way it always was when I arrived. I grimaced.

"Anybody home?" I called.

"Ben?" Her voice was surprised, anxious. "Is that you, Ben?"

"Hello, Betty," I said tonelessly. She rushed to the front door and threw herself into my arms. Her hair was in curlers, and she smelled of frying fat.

"Ben, Ben darling, you're back. Oh Ben, how I missed you."

"Did you?"

"Ben, let me look at you." She held me away from her and then lifted her face and took my mouth hungrily. I could still smell the frying fat aroma.

I pushed her away from me gently. "Hey," I said, "cut it out. Way you're behaving, people would never guess we've been married three years."

She sighed deeply. "You know, Ben," she said, "I hate your job."

MUGGED AND PRINTED

HENRY KANE (*Far Cry*) is the creator of *Peter Chambers*, and a writer who gave up a busy law practice to try his hand at fictional murder. His hand has been a busy one since. In the past seven years, he's produced seven novels, countless short stories, and has scripted for TV and the movies. His *Armchair In Hell* is a classic in the tough-guy school, and the novelette in this issue is in the same tradition. Chambers and Kane have been in some tough spots. They usually involve exciting women which has its moments.

RICHARD S. PRATHER (*Hot-Rock Rumble*) now lives and writes in his native California, where he created Shell Scott, who roams through *Bodies In Bedlam*, *Way Of A Wanton*, and other novels. He's been writing murder stories since 1949, before which he spent four years in the Merchant Marine on the bounding main, "which was usually not bounding, but quite flat and disgusting." He's been married five years, he says, to an incredibly lovely woman, Tina, whose measurements are "much more interesting."

RICHARD DEMING (*The Loyal One*) is the author of two mystery novels. *The Gallows In My Garden* and *Tweak The Devil's Nose*. He received his formal writing education at the University of Iowa where one professor died suddenly, shortly after reading one of his scripts. Deming says, "No one has ever been unkind enough to suggest any connection." He now lives and writes in Dunkirk, New York with his eight-year-old daughter and his wife, an ex-Army nurse he met when he was a Captain in Naples during the last war.

CHARLES BECKMAN, JR., whose *Ybor City*, is the second of his stories to appear in Manhunt, now lives in Corpus Christi, Texas — where he busily surveys his surroundings for authentic background material. His work has appeared in dozens of mystery magazines, and his novel, *Honky Tonk Girl*, exhibits his jazz-musician background at its best. He is now working on a new novel, between chapters of which he's doing another yarn for Manhunt. *Ybor City* is a fascinating story of a man's relentless chase after an unknown killer.

EVAN HUNTER is a New Yorker born and bred, whose *Small Homicide* is a completely different story from his Matt Cordell stories in Manhunt. Author of two mystery novels, *The Evil Sleep* and *Don't Crowd Me*, his past includes such unrelated jobs as Borscht Belt pianist, vocational high school teacher, telephone dispatcher, and lobster salesman. He has a beautiful wife, three sons, a Hicksville, N. Y. home, an Oldsmobile, and a typewriter — all, he says, essential to his good spirits, good living, and good writing.

MICHAEL FESSIER, after staying thirteen years in Hollywood, where he wrote and produced motion pictures which were consistently successful, returned to the East to have another whack at his first love — novel writing. The result was *Clovis*, a fine follow-up to his first novel, *Fully Dressed and in His Right Mind*. Married and with two children, he also continues to turn out fine short stories like *The Faceless Man* in this issue. This is a terrifying account of what happens to an irrational mob that gets out of control.

IN THIS ISSUE:

TNT

Henry Kane is here with a Peter Chambers novelette that mixes a high-diving blonde and a $50,000 policy with murder and mayhem. Richard S. Prather has thrown Shell Scott into a mess of stolen jewels and the people who stole them in a thrilling tale titled *Hot-Rock Rumble.*

TROUBLE

Harold Q. Masur is on tap with a Scott Jordan story about an empty safe deposit box — emptied on its owner's signature while the owner is in prison! And Evan Hunter starts his *Small Homicide* with a dead baby girl in a church, and takes us on the fascinating police hunt for the killer.

THREAT

Michael Fessier is back with *The Faceless Man*, the story of a sheriff, an ex-convict, and the angry mob that wanted his life. And Richard Deming has put a wounded man, his beautiful wife, and a hungry gunman together in a snowbound cabin in a story of flaring emotions and hate.

TERROR

Charles Beckman takes us to Ybor city, Tampa's Spanish district, for a murder committed in a dark alley, and the driving motivation of the man out to solve it. Emmanuel Winters is here with *The Caller*, the terrifying tale of a woman receiving phone calls from a stranger with one thing on his mind.

TIEUP

And wrapping up the issue with a solid knot is a story by Hunt Collins, plus *Crime Cavalcade*, plus Manhunt's *Movie of the Month.* A jam-packed June jamboree!